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Project Title: The Pedagogy of Action Learning Facilitation – A Critique of the Role of the Facilitator in an Organisational Leadership Programme

Programme Title: Doctor of Professional Studies: Organisational Management Learning

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Awarded by: School of Health and Education, Department of Education, Middlesex University

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents professional practice research into Action Learning (AL) facilitation. Motivated by a combination of my formative years of cultural transmission and my enduring interest in learning and how it is facilitated, I have explored the professional practice of the AL facilitator. This was achieved through a process of critical inquiry, self-reflection and evaluation of action learning practice within a Higher Education Post Graduate Programme, commissioned by an English NHS Mental Health Trust. I adopted action research as my overarching research approach which I built into the one-year post graduate programme for the purpose of my research. This enabled planning, fact-finding, taking actions and analysing actions with my co-facilitators as an iterative process to explore the practice of action learning facilitation. Thematic analysis, which involves a 5-step process, was used to collate and investigate the research data.

Results from this research reinforce the significance of the role of the AL facilitator in the learning process and offer a model of pedagogy of AL facilitation presented here as the art, craft and apparatus of AL facilitation practice. The ‘art’ of AL facilitation relates to the underpinning commitment and values of the facilitator which inform responses to participants in the sets. The ‘craft’ of AL facilitation encompasses facilitator knowledge, skills and experience and the ‘apparatus’ is the structures and systems that support the facilitation processes.

This work contributes to the current literature on action learning and the practice of AL facilitation by offering a framework which visualises the pedagogy of action learning facilitation as a holistic point of reference for the learning and practice of AL facilitation.

Key words: *Action learning, action learning facilitation, facilitation pedagogy and frameworks.*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AL	Action Learning
ALS	Action Learning Set
CIPD	Chartered Institution of Personnel Development
HRD	Human Resource Development
MA	Masters of Arts
MHT	Mental Health Trust
IAF	International Association of Facilitators
ELT	Experiential Learning Teams
GRG	Group Reflective Gathering

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context

In this chapter I have undertaken a personal critique, which begins with my formative years and my journey into higher education. I then critique the phases of my career and finally my transition into academia, culminating the stimulus for my doctoral research. I offer a narrative, with some critical reflections, to determine the factors that have influenced me, who I am and my ingrained values and beliefs that have shaped my personal and professional identity. This has helped me to consider my personal ontological values of how I see myself in relation to others in the world, as well as epistemologically, that is, how I interpret the world around me and how I know what I know. This process has helped me to appreciate and recognise the rationale for my selection of this research topic.

Firstly, I outline my key life experiences and learning during my career that inform and provide the bedrock of why I have chosen to engage in this inquiry, both for myself and what I hope to contribute to the theory and practice of action learning (AL) and, more generally, to the facilitation of learning in groups. I next, provide the context of my research inquiry and describe the process I underwent to develop my research project.

1.2 Formative Shaping of Perspectives

I grew up in a loving, close-knit family with my parents, brother and sister, along with my great grandmother and grandparents who stayed with us. My aunts, uncles and cousins often came to stay with us and all of our social activities, including holidays were spent with the ‘extended’ family. In fact, I was not familiar with the concept of an extended family when I was young because for me it was the norm. My father was the eldest son and from the earliest time that I can remember, he always regarded it as his role and responsibility to look after everyone in the family which included providing financial support as well as guidance and advice. So the concept of enabling and helping others, e.g. ‘to facilitate’, was ingrained in me from childhood.

As the eldest child, it naturally fell upon me to take on the ‘big sister’ role and I took this role very seriously. My grandfather was instrumental in this. He talked to me about setting an example to my brothers and sisters, both by making sure that I got excellent grades, as well in my behaviour with others. He used a metaphor of boats on a river, saying that “a row of boats always follows the first boat when crossing a river” and that I have to “lead the way for my younger siblings to follow”. I took this in my stride as a young girl, taking the responsibility to communicate this message by working hard in school and encouraging my siblings to do the same. I sat for hours with my sister and some of my cousins before their exams to help them learn and prepare. I was always glad to help but also regarded this as my role as their older sister. On reflection, I believe that this was the start of my role as a facilitator of learning which was embedded as a result of cultural transmission, e.g. imitation of behaviours of my elders (Lehmann *et al.*, 2010) and playing the role of the socialising agent (Zukow, 1989), as the eldest sibling has the obligation to carry forward family traditions. These formative years appear to have shaped my behaviour and informed my perspective of the role of facilitation in learning. On reflection, I believe it was this early cultural learning (Van Schaik and Burkart, 2011) that sowed the first seeds on the concept of facilitation and facilitative skills which I may not have been able to acquire independently later on in my career.

Another overarching principle which I have taken from these early years is to be considerate of others and respect differences. By growing up in an extended family, I had to learn to share and be respectful to my elders. My great grandmother had an enormous influence on my life because she was married at the age of 15 and widowed before she was 17. She told me many stories about her life as a young Indian widow and the restrictions and isolation which she had

accepted. She seemed happy to live her life through her grandchildren and great grandchildren. Her stories gave me the space to discover the implicit meaning of what was being said, enabling me to learn about values, traditions, culture and to discover and own what I wanted. I think she liberated me through these stories, always encouraging and inspiring me, and helping me to understand the value in being positive and happy in making others happy. I have realised the importance of using narratives and storytelling to determine one's identity and cultural transmission e.g. values, goals, customs and beliefs (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001). Furthermore, I believe my way of 'looking at things', my personal traits and the way I interact with others, continues to be influenced by my great grandmother and her stories. These words of the novelist Terry Pratchett are perhaps so often quoted because they capture an experience that resonates with so many of us.

"People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around."

My schooling contributed significantly to my formative influences; I thoroughly enjoyed my school life and I loved and felt loved by my teachers. I now recognise that this feeling of love was not so much about *what* I learnt but more about *how* I learnt; it was the nurturing and supportive environment created by my teachers that facilitated my learning. I have since, consciously or unconsciously, always tried to create this learning environment around me. Reflecting back, I realise that I modelled my 'older sister' role in school and offered to facilitate the learning of others by helping my friends who struggled with subjects in class. I must have got something out of helping and supporting others to learn, rather than be influenced by the element of competition in the school environment, e.g. '*who got the highest grade?*' I think I related to, and fully embraced, the nurturing and cooperative aspects, trying to ensure that 'we' all did well and got good grades. This conceptualisation of the conditions for learning has continued to impact on my practice.

My transition to higher secondary school, which is equivalent to A levels in the UK, involved a sudden shift in 'culture'. I was sent to a boarding school in a hill station far away from home because of the political unrest in the city in which I lived with my parents. From a place of unchanging continuity, secured in the tradition of my upbringing and a strong sense of belonging, I was now in a different environment which required rapid adaptation to 'fit in'. Here, I can relate to Mead's (1970) analysis of figuration of cultures which makes a distinction between post-figurative and co-figurative culture. This shift, from a place of certainty to uncertainty, was very challenging and unsettling at first. I felt out-of-depth with some peers who seemed more experienced and I was also less confident in my academic ability during the

first few months and convinced that I would be bottom of the class. However, the first set of class tests confirmed that I was able to manage the ‘uncertainties’ and focus on the ‘now’. In addition, the board exam was brand new and we were the first cohort to take these exams. The syllabus was also new for the teachers and we had no ‘test papers’ to help us prepare for our final exams. I remember setting up ‘tutorials’ in my dormitory before my exams, working in groups to decide on topics to prioritise. I also worked in pairs to study a topic and share with larger groups so that we could all learn and prepare together. This may not have been the beginning of AL; however, I now recognise these actions as glimpses of my natural instinct for facilitating the learning of others.

The next shift was from secondary school to higher education, which required further figuration of the culture (Mead, 1970). I was fortunate enough to be enrolled at a top university in India, but this meant moving further away from the parental home and the uncertainties that came with it. I did not enjoy university as much as my school because the renowned professors’ lectures, though inspiring, did not fully engage me. I realised, much later, that my preference for ‘active’ learning was a barrier here. Also, the highly academic learning environment, unfortunately, bred competitiveness amongst some students and I was appalled when library books disappeared for long periods and it was suggested that some students held onto books to prevent others from accessing them. This was a sharp contrast to my previous experience of co-operative learning. I realise now that I deeply value a culture of learning which is considerate and supportive of everyone, with an element of ‘looking out for each other’, to maximise learning amongst everyone rather than a select few. This becomes a grounding principle in my practice in later years and it is this aspect of social learning that is the subject of my research inquiry.

After graduating, I continued with my post-graduate studies, but in a different university. Fortunately, the academic environment was more conducive to my personal learning and I started to make the most out of my university life. However, I got married while still studying for my masters in India and moved to the UK with my husband. As I was determined to complete my MA, I went back to India to take my exams within a few weeks of moving to the UK, much to the surprise of my professors and friends. I later discovered my natural preference as a ‘completer-finisher’ through Belbin’s Team Role Inventory (Belbin, 1981; 1993). I hope this preference will serve me well in achieving my doctorate.

1.3 Moving to the UK

The cultural transmission, through the co-figurative phase (Mead, 1970), took a leap when I moved from the eastern to the western world. Exposure to the western world was a new experience and it was exciting to travel around Europe and see the places that I had read about in books. However, there was a process of acculturation, both in terms of learning to manage a home, as well as getting used to the new way of doing things. In the early days, this was simply the ways of shopping, travelling and socialising. I was motivated by these differences and was able to move quickly from the liminal space of unfamiliarity (Van Gennep, 2011; Turner, 1987) to starting to learn by experiencing the new ways of doing things. This cultural learning, I believe, has contributed significantly to my ability to relate to differences in individuals and to try and create a space which is open and safe for all individuals to learn. The need to create a safe environment within AL is now my inquiry in this research project.

In less than a year of living in the UK, I started working as a civil service officer and got my first on-the-job experience in the public service, as well as during formal training. The importance of employee training, both for individual development as well as the organisation's success, became apparent to me as I attended the in-house training and applied it in my role at work. My experience of 'learning' as a student in India was restricted to what I regard as the traditional methods of intervention. It was tutor-led and based on text book supported theories. The trainings I attended at work were interventions which were deliberately planned and delivered to assist my process of learning and allow me to be effective in my work. This exposure to facilitative learning, where learning occurs due to the educator acting as a facilitator, by engaging with the learners and building a relationship and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning (Roger, 1969; Laird 1985), was a positive experience for me and sowed the seeds for my future career in learning and development.

My civil service job was short-lived as I became a mother and decided to be at home with my daughter, but I returned to work five years later and joined a charity organisation as a co-ordinator which involved the training of volunteers. I experienced the support and guidance of colleagues as a 'mentor' in this role. I discovered that the main benefit of learning, through real work experiences guided by a mentor, is that the techniques employed lead to meaningful learning, as opposed to the rote learning process I experienced in school. In this role, I had the opportunity to improve my facilitation skills and discovered aspects of learning, as a social process, as I designed and facilitated the learning of the volunteers in group activities. I will

apply this experience in my research to explore the role of the facilitator, specifically in the context of AL.

1.4 Experience of Career in Learning and Development

My next role as a manager in a local authority was a career progression and I continued to work within the council for the next 18 years in various learning and development roles. I started as a Training and Development Advisor and progressed to the role of Workforce Development Manager, which was a senior human resource development role within the council. During this period, as part of my continuous professional development, I engaged in a range of learning activities and achieved several qualifications including: Training and Development NVQ Level 4, Assessor/Verifier Award and Advanced Certificate in Coaching and Mentoring.

As an employee and line manager, I attended a series of training courses which provided exposure to various styles of facilitation of learning. At the same time, by delivering workshops and training sessions, I learnt the skills of designing and delivering sessions to maximise the learning of participants. Through the experience of delivering these sessions, I discovered the value of social interactions within the sessions to engage and involve the participants. I learnt that collective learning processes had to be negotiated between the participants and will emerge as a process of shared understanding within the group through the facilitation process. Therefore, I needed to ensure that the needs and methods of learning were not defined by me, as a learning facilitator, but are agreed and owned by the participants and, where appropriate, their managers.

As I experienced working with a range of ‘audiences’ in these sessions, I realised that some participants were there because ‘*my manager asked me to come*’, while others were genuinely enthusiastic and motivated to learn and share their experiences. As a learning facilitator, this highlighted that an individual cannot be taught if he or she does not want to learn and the learner must be encouraged to take some responsibility for their own learning. To ensure this, as a facilitator I needed to provide learning opportunities which, while being relevant to the learner’s needs, must also challenge the learner. Such opportunities often present added responsibilities providing choice, and hence a level of control over how, where and when to engage in the activity. This approach is advocated by Pedler *et al.*, (1986) in management development, which seeks to increase the ability and willingness of the learner to take responsibility of his/her own learning. Therefore, creating a learning environment where the

learner can set his/her own goals is crucial. As a facilitator, I learnt that my role was to ensure that, not only the learning intervention was valuable in itself, but more importantly, it was perceived as valuable by the learner.

Following completion of my CIPD Coach Mentor qualification, I started one-to-one coaching within my role as a HRD manager. The learning from the programme and the practical experience of coaching, helped me to fully understand that coaching is about building on the strengths of an individual, rather than only focusing on their weakness; it is a supportive relationship, where the coach sees the coachees in terms of their future potential and builds their self-awareness, responsibility and self-belief to achieve their goals (Whitmore, 2002). In the role of a coach, I discovered that ‘structured collaborative conversations’ (Julie Starr, 2008), ‘an engagement in the thinking process’ (Parsole, 1999), a ‘people-focused’ approach (Lee, 2003) and ‘making the connection in the mind’ (Lucas, 2001), can give the coachee the opportunity to ‘learn’ and ‘proactively become the person they want to be’.

This experience, as a human resource development practitioner and as a qualified coach in facilitating the learning of others, forms the basis of my interest in my doctoral topic. I have applied this extensive experience as a facilitator of learning within the AL process which has led to my research inquiry. I have been able to transfer both my skills as a human resource development practitioner, as well as my passion for facilitating learning and development, to this context.

1.5 My First Experience of AL

As a local authority manager, I was nominated to join an AL set which was facilitated by an external consultant. The set members were managers across the council from a range of departments. Here, I experienced the use of AL as a facilitative intervention for management development. My overall impression was that the questioning techniques were effective in enabling AL members to critically reflect on individual challenges and the process worked well when the members were willing to share and discuss their problems and challenges. As an AL member, I was able to articulate my concerns through questioning and reflection which provided me with an opportunity to reconstruct my experience with my ‘comrades in adversity’ (Revans, 1980).

However, we had one instance when an AL member felt overwhelmed when discussing her 'issue' started to cry and left the set. In another instance, when the facilitator offered 'air space' to the set members, there was a reluctance in the group in coming forward with a 'messy problem' (Revans, 1980). In fact, I offered to discuss an issue, e.g. a messy problem, even though I already had my air space the previous week. This highlighted that the learning process is often 'anxiety laden' and that failure to acknowledge and work with such anxiety can lead to defensive behaviour and an impaired learning process.

This experience emphasised for me that the learning relationship within an AL set can be supportive as well as challenging. I remember thinking that the role of the facilitator was not an easy one, although it seemed quite simple at the beginning. From this experience, I learnt that in order to promote learning, it is imperative to remove anxiety and associated anger, fear and frustration within the group.

For my own learning, I think it was fortunate that I experienced both positive situations and challenging experiences in facilitating learning within a small group. This retained my interest in AL, especially the role of the facilitator and when I was given the opportunity to facilitate an AL set, later in my career, I was able to apply this learning and experience in the role.

1.6 Relating Theories to Practice – MA in HRD

Between the years of 2003-2005, I undertook a MA in Human Resource Management in the Business School at Middlesex University while still working in my workforce development role in the council. I opted for the development pathway within the programme as I wanted to enhance my knowledge and skills in this area in order to progress in my career. The introduction to the range of theories, definitions and models, during the MA programme, increased my academic knowledge on the subject and I was able to consider and apply the theories and models to my practice. For example, I adopted action research tools such as Appreciative Inquiry during team development sessions, applied Kurt Lewin's Change Management model (Lewin, 1947) to support managers and staff to address a major restructure in the organization and set up a 'community of practices' (Wenger, 1998) within two existing networks within my area of work. I adopted learning tools within the sessions I delivered in my role as a HRD practitioner such as: the coaching GROW model, the change curve, the ladder of inference and Senge's (1990) five disciplines.

Through engaging with academia, I found myself reflecting on my own practice, identifying the gaps between the values I adopt about my practice and my experience of it as a ‘living contradiction’ (Whitehead, 1989). I realised that, as a facilitator of learning, to enable collective reflection it is not sufficient to simply ask the participants what they think; I also needed to introduce new perspectives to help people to move beyond their own experience. This supports the concept of ‘learning community’ where members are open to ideas, are able to challenge assumptions, willing to deconstruct ‘mental models’ (Senge, 1994), engage in power struggles and the tensions that differences create, which results in a process of change through reflection and learning. As a learning facilitator, I recognise the importance of ‘ethics of care’ (Hartog, 2002; Noddings, 2002) towards my learners, to minimise external threats and create an environment where the learner can thrive. Similarly, to remove anxiety, it is essential to construct a ‘cycle of emotions’ (Vince, 1996) to enable effective learning. My engagement with academia helped me to ground my practice and the experience of being able to relate theory to practice was a brilliant experience. My doctoral studies are a continuation of this inquiry and exploration of my own practice.

1.7 Transition to Academia

Soon after completing my Masters, I was approached by the Head of the Department, Human Resource Management in the Business School at Middlesex University to take on the role as an Associate Lecturer and I initially accepted for a part-time role while still holding my full-time practitioner role in the local authority. However, over a period of five years, I transited from my part-time Associate Lecturer role to a full-time Senior Lecturer role, specialising in areas such as individual, team and organisational learning, professional practice, coaching, mentoring and AL.

Both my practitioner experience and my learning from the MA programme has helped me in this new lectureship position to plan and design sessions for MA HRM students which relate academic theories to critical analyses of its application in the world of business. I now recognise the concept of ‘learning together’ which I experienced in my early years as an established learning strategy used by many UK universities including Middlesex.

In the last three years, I have been part of a new team within the department (Organisation and Leadership Practice) specialising in developing bespoke academic qualifications in collaboration with organisations to meet their strategic needs. In this role, I have led on a Post

Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management course which I developed in collaboration with an English NHS Mental Health Trust (MHT), aimed at improving the leadership capacity of mid-level managers through work-based learning. My doctoral research study is positioned within a series of AL sessions which are part of this bespoke Middlesex University Business School post-graduate leadership development programme.

1.8 Developing my Research Inquiry

The critical reflections of my formative influences, alongside a review of my career in learning and development, clearly demonstrate that the concept of facilitation, which began as a cultural transmission and learning from behaviours of my elders in my early years (Lehmann, Feldman and Kaeuffer, 2010; Van Schaik and Burkart, 2011), continued to develop during my educational years and finally culminated in my professional practice in learning and development. I have applied my experience as a facilitator of learning, e.g. plan, design, develop and implement a range of effective learning interventions, both for groups, as well as one-to-one learning and development opportunities within the AL process, as a part of delivering the Mental Health Trust (MHT) Post Graduate Leadership and Management programme.

As the lead co-ordinator of the MHT Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management programme, as well as one of the action learning facilitators, I had three years' experience of working with the sponsors of the programme, designing, delivering and co-facilitating the study days and supporting one of the AL sets. The programme was first launched in February 2014 with 16 participants (Cohort 1). The second group (Cohort 2) of 15 participants commenced in January 2015 and the third group (Cohort 3), of 15 participants, started in January 2016. The participants were sponsored by the MHT and their application to enrol on the programme was supported by their line managers. They were mainly in management roles, either with direct line management responsibilities or with supervision and project involvement requiring people management capabilities, working at a range of different operational levels, including clinical and non-clinical services.

I was able to transfer both my skills as a human resource development practitioner, as well as my passion for facilitating learning and development to this context, to support the AL members to maximise their learning experience. I also planned and implemented the evaluation strategy for this programme for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2. Initial evaluation findings clearly

indicated that AL is an effective method of leadership and management development, as suggested in the literature (Boshyk, 2002; O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; Raelin 2008; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Leonard and Land, 2010). To explore this further, I led a research study with the facilitation team to examine, '*Why and how action learning works within a Leadership Development Programme: a case study within a UK Public Sector Leadership and Management post-graduate programme*', which was presented at the University Forum of Human Resource Development (UFHRD) 16th International Conference in June 2015. Through the process of conducting this research study, I engaged with the current literature on AL and had the opportunity to relate theory to practice. This enabled me to develop a keen personal interest in this topic, particularly in the role of the facilitator in AL. At the same time, I had very positive feedback from my AL members during my role as an AL facilitator, in Cohort 1 and 2 of this programme. Through group reflections with co-AL facilitators, I had the opportunity to review my practice of AL facilitation which raised several questions for me and I realised that deeper reflexivity is needed to conceptualise the practice of AL. Over the last year, this exploration has fully engaged me and has become the centre of my practice and research.

By reflecting on my practice as a learning facilitator in these AL sessions, I have concluded, so far, that I have a clear understanding of the purpose of the AL sessions within the leadership programme. This is to provide a safe and confidential forum to the participants in order to consider their current leadership and/or management issues and apply relevant leadership concepts, models and contexts addressed within the programme to gain deeper and new insights, to enable them to resolve real work problems (Dilworth and Willis 2003). The emphasis is therefore, on practice-based learning, in which AL is used for personal development, as well as organisational impact. Here, the context and intended outputs and my role in supporting the learning, is clear to me as a facilitator. However, what is less clear is the processes, e.g. '*what do I do*', '*what don't I do*' and '*what happens*'.

This has made me recognise and become increasingly aware of some of the complexities and dynamics within an AL process and how learning and action is facilitated. I have become conscious of the different relational dimensions that the facilitator must be aware of to effectively manage and support AL members within an AL set. Although the current literature, so far, mainly refers to this role as a 'coach' (O'Neil and Marsick, 2014) or 'set advisor' (Pedler and Abbott, 2013), this is neither a one-to-one coaching situation or an advisory role. Essentially, I believe I am providing coaching support to 4 to 5 individuals at the same time.

This then requires building rapport and establishing clarity of purpose, not just with one individual but several individuals at the same time. Also, rather than advising individuals, I must encourage the development of skills such as presenting issues, listening, questioning, reflecting and taking action (Pelder and Abbott, 2013) in the AL members.

Some of the questions arising from my practice of AL facilitation, to date, are:

- Should I focus on the problem, the process or both when supporting the AL member to understand his or her ‘messy problem’ and take action as well as encourage and empower others as ‘comrades in adversity’ (Revans, 1980) to do the same?
- Should I focus on helping and supporting individuals to learn, improve practise and take action and hope that this will, in turn, impact on organization development? Or should I encourage individuals to consider organisational impact as well?
- To be an effective facilitator, should my aim be to align to everyone in the group, but still remain neutral? Can I truly achieve this?
- How can I manage these different dimensions and parallel processes?
- What is happening in this learning space?
- What should and should I not do?
- What does this mean for me and my practice as the ‘professional’ supporting these processes?

These emergent questions have made me realise that, although based on simple ideas, the process of effective AL facilitation is not simple. This has led to a keen personal interest and critical curiosity in the processes involved in AL. Therefore, the practice of the AL facilitator in supporting these processes will be explored at depth in my research study.

Another aspect of the practice of facilitating the AL sessions which has been highlighted through the group reflective gathering process with my co-facilitators last year (four sessions with two others, facilitated by a fourth colleague), is that each facilitator has her/ his own style and appears to be guided by their own core principles, values and previous experiences. What has become clear to me is that, as AL facilitators within this programme we have applied and agreed a structure with some suggested open questions to stimulate conversations in our individual AL sets. However our ‘stories’ and experiences within each set varied. The difference in individual experiences highlighted that perspectives and values, which are central to our sense of being, will impact our practice. Therefore, another area of exploration for me is ‘what grounds each of us in our practice of facilitation?’ For me, pedagogically, I believe

that learning in groups (social learning) can address both individual needs and organisational development. I consider the process of learning to be as important as the content and outcome; we can learn about work, at work and through work. I always apply the adult learning theory (Knowles, 1970) as an overarching principle in my practice of learning facilitation. My approach, therefore, is to facilitate the learning and development of each member of the group by encouraging the learner to be the focal point of the learning process. If this reflects my professional values, what values ground the practice of other facilitators? Can or does this lead to variation in practice? I have not considered this at great length in my practice so far, but would like to explore this further in this research study.

Finally, this critical engagement with myself has helped me to consider the way I look at things, the way I am and the way I do (Maguire, 2015), e.g. influences on my thinking and practice. This has established that facilitation of others and the skills and competencies that are central to the practice of facilitation which has become a part of my DNA. This doctoral study is a culmination of the influences and experiences I have addressed in this chapter. Through this doctoral study I aim to develop a framework for the facilitation of AL which will address the processes, as well as the skills and capabilities essential to the practice of AL. This will be of benefit to practitioners and facilitators of AL and other related fields, as currently research specifically on the pedagogy of AL is scarce.

1.9 Research Objectives

The purpose of this research is to contribute to practice in this area and to knowledge in the field of facilitation. The aim of this particular research project is to explore the practice of the AL facilitator working with participants on a leadership programme. The objectives to achieve this aim include examining through a process of critical inquiry, self-reflection and evaluation the conditions, processes and capabilities a facilitator can create to enable participants to learn and take action in an organisational leadership development programme.

Research Objectives:

1. Critically analyse the role of facilitation in goal orientated groups.
2. Explore the practice of AL facilitation, to support learning and actions of group members.
3. Critically evaluate the skills, capabilities and competencies required for effective facilitation of AL in leadership development.

In Chapter 2, I will review the literature, which has informed this research inquiry.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

My practitioner-academic experience in human resource development, particularly in facilitation of learning, discussed in Chapter 1 has increasingly informed my area of doctoral interest. This research explores the practice of the action learning facilitator, through reflection of and inquiry into my own experience (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002), with support from my co-facilitators and colleagues. In the context of this research, I am an insider researcher, researching and developing my own practice of facilitation of action learning in collaboration with others in my work place. This aspect of the ‘dual role’ is explored further in Chapter 4.

Within this literature review, the facilitation role is considered in the context of helping and empowering participants to learn in a social group environment. The literature referred to in this study spans nearly eight decades from the 1940s to 2017. The sources are mainly western centric with studies and authors based in the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand. These sources are appropriate for use as the focus of this research is within the context of a UK National Health Trust and a UK University post graduate programme.

However, there is limited research specifically on the role of the facilitator in action learning. Therefore, rather than offering a conventional review of literature solely centring on my research focus, I began by exploring more generic concepts such as systems and group dynamics theories and how learning occurs in groups, to consider the systems of behaviours and psychological processes that occur in groups. I also reviewed the theory of experiential learning as a method of learning in teams and groups which enabled me to consider the various components of experiential learning and relate them to the context of action learning. Next, I reviewed the current literature on the practice of facilitation. I have considered the theories of facilitation to seek clarification on the various aspects involved in facilitation. This review of the generic facilitation role is followed by a specific focus on action learning as a method of group experiential learning and the role of the facilitator within it. Previous AL literature refers to the AL facilitator as ‘coach’ leading me to include literature on coaching, specifically team coaching and the role of a coach in group learning, in order to identify similarities and differences in the assumptions, processes and role of the ‘coach’ within these interventions. In considering the role of the ‘coach’ within experiential and critical reflection schools of action learning, I have reviewed a small selection of literature on reflexive and reflective practice. This has enabled me to consider both individual (including my own) and collective reflective

processes within action learning. Finally, I have added to the literature during the course of this research, to locate and consider my experiences and observations as I have gone along. This has led me to identify two other concepts as they were directly relevant to the research; mindfulness and the meaning of pedagogy. I am keen to understand the consequences of the mindfulness exercises which were used within the action learning process with the participants, specifically for the facilitators and the impact on their facilitation role. As my research is on the pedagogy of action learning, I have reviewed this concept to deepen my understanding of how I and others interpret what it is, so that I can clearly define it in the context of my research. The key concepts of my literature review are shown in Figure. 1.

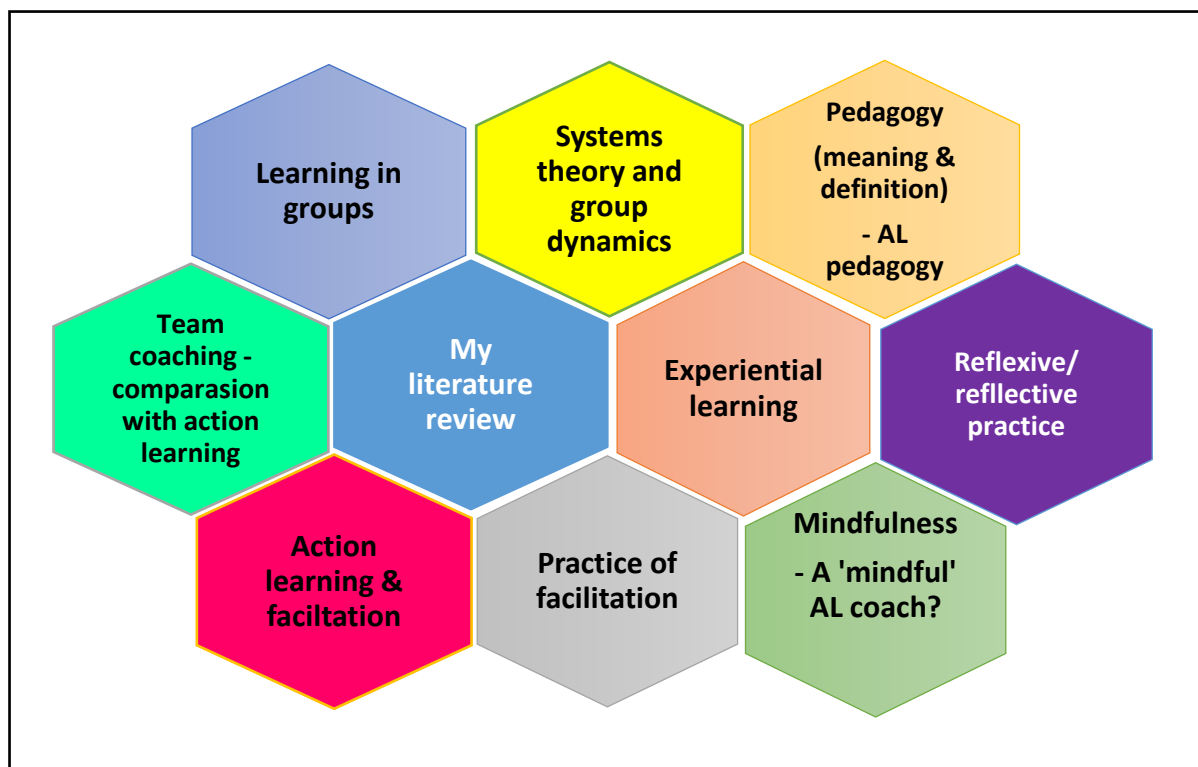


Figure 1: Components of my literature review.

2.2 Systems Theory and Group Dynamics

Systems theory describes how individuals behave within a system. In origin, systems theory is a biological model, an interdisciplinary theory about the complex systems in nature, society and science and is a framework by which one can investigate and/or describe any group of objects that work together to produce some result (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). As groups are considered as systems, systems theory helps us begin to comprehend how each person's actions make sense in the context of the group. Systems theory helps us to understand that group

dynamics is a more complex process than just summing up the individual characteristics of each group member. Instead, group dynamics is about the characteristics of each group member, how each group member's behaviour affects others in the group and how these interactions affect all group members and all group members' relationships.

Group dynamics then are a system of behaviours and psychological processes that occur between members of a group. These dynamics are affected by each member's internal thoughts and feelings, their expressed thoughts and feelings, their non-verbal communication and the relationship between group members. Group analysis was first developed by Foulkes (1946) as a therapy for individuals via group interactions. Foulkes regarded groups as basic to human existence, all individuals being born into social groups (families, cultures and societies) that shape the lifespan continuously in conscious and less conscious ways. Bion (1961) argued that in every group, two groups are present: the work group and the basic assumption group. The work group is an aspect of group functioning which is associated with the primary task of the group, for example, what the group has chosen to accomplish which will 'keep the group anchored to a sophisticated and rational level of behaviour' (Bion, 1961: 66). The basic assumption group describes the implicit underlying assumptions, in which the behaviour of the group is based. Bion (1961) specifically identified three basic assumptions: dependency, fight-flight and pairing. In dependency, the essential aim of the group is to attain security through, and have its members protected by, one individual. Hence, in a group, a 'leader' usually emerges and the rest of the group members behave passively and act as though the leader, by contrast, is omnipotent and omniscient. In the basic assumption of fight-flight, the group behaves as though it has met to preserve itself at all costs. Fight-flight group members think they can only achieve this by running away from someone, or fighting someone or something. In fight, the group may be characterized by aggressiveness and hostility; in flight, the group may chit-chat, tell stories, arrive late or perform any other activities that serve to avoid addressing the task at hand. The leader for this sort of group is one who can mobilize the group for attack, or lead it in flight or turn on the facilitator. The final basic assumption group, the voluntary pairing of two people in the group regardless of what may appear as differences such as gender, ethnicity etc., carry out the work of the group through their continued interaction. The remaining group members listen eagerly and attentively with a sense of relief and hopeful anticipation.

Lewin (1947) highlighted that any kind of group action is regulated by circular-causal processes of individual perceptions and/or fact finding. This affects interpersonal behaviour between members of the group, referred to as interaction theory or the interaction analysis system (Bales, 1970; McLeish *et al.*, 1973; Jaques, 1984) which takes into account the emotional, intellectual, non-verbal, content and context of individuals engaged in group interaction. It is often argued that group phenomena can be held to be real, to the extent that group members respond consciously or unconsciously to such phenomena as if they exist (Bion, 1961; Jaques, 1984). Freud (1975: 42) also viewed dynamics of group behaviour as a sort of collective extension of individuals, emphasising the tendency of individuals to accept and co-operate with others. He observes:

‘The whole of this intolerance [which people feel towards strangers] vanishes, temporarily or permanently, as the result of the formation of a group, and in a group. So long as a group formation persists or so far as it extends, individuals behave as though they were uniform, tolerate other people’s peculiarities, put themselves on an equal level with them and have no feeling of aversion towards them. [...] [The] essence of a group formation consists in a new kind of libidinal ties among the members of the group.’

However, while recognising the collective extension of individuals and their dynamics in groups, it is also essential to consider and recognise differences in groups rather than just manage them (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003). These authors suggest that emphasis on psychological explanations, in preference to social critique, has held back the development of a theory-in-action towards differences. Fraser (1994) also argued that propositions of a space, where status distinctions can somehow be neutralised and where people can ‘deliberate “as if” they were social equals’, is unrealistic (p, 80). Therefore, in facilitation of groups, rather than ‘bracketing’ differences so that communication can be untainted by them, it is suggested that the differences need to be recognised, deconstructed, understood and confronted (Giroux, 1988, 1992; Ellsworth, 1989; Weiler, 1991).

These interpretations of group dynamics, particularly in the context of group learning, can enable group analysis which focuses on communication, relationship, dialogue and exchange, resulting in better personal functioning and interpersonal relations. Bion (1961) believed that understanding of such aspects in group dynamics would result in potential insight regarding effective facilitation of co-operative group work.

More recently, Thornton (2016) has identified nine fundamental processes in group dynamics that contribute to the total experience of the group. These are: group matrix, communication, translation, mirroring, exchange, resonance, condenser phenomena, location and the reflection process. *Group matrix* is not different from group dynamics, but is broader and more specific in its meaning; it is the totality of communication and experience in a particular group over time, as well as the common biological and cultural heritage of individuals. Thus, each person in a group is both an individual, as well as part of a larger entity. Therefore, a group coach will have to be aware that what they communicate will have a personal meaning, but potentially also a meaning shared by the group as a whole. *Communication* encompasses everything that happens in a group, not just what is said, so a group coach must entertain the possibility that everything is significant and notice patterns, repeated or shared, that might hold meaning for individuals as well the group as a whole. *Translation*, in the group context, is the process of putting into words communications made in some other way, making the communication more explicit. *Mirroring* is the experience of similarity and *negative mirroring* is the denial of similarities by group members. *Exchange* is the innumerable small interactions through which group members take in new information. *Resonance* is the felt sense of links between members' experience, including their emotional content, resulting in a deeper mutual understanding. *Condenser Phenomena* refers to the shift in the group, a release of tension as previously unconscious or hidden material is shared, often through metaphorical or symbolic ideas in the discussion. *Location* is the principle that every event, even if confined to one or two people in the group, involves the group as a whole in some way. This means that if one person acquires a particular 'role' in a group, in which they become fixed, this can be problematic. The *reflection process* is very useful in learning groups; this arises when someone tells a story or shares an experience and the group picks up on this and feels its dynamic, including emotional content of which the person was not previously conscious, giving the individual the opportunity to learn from the experience. Thornton (2016: 45) suggests that a group coach needs to be aware of these group processes in gaining full understanding of 'what is really happening' in the group and his/her interventions should focus 'on holding the group in a productive balance between safety and challenge', facilitating the group to achieve its task.

Another consideration in group dynamics is the emergence of sub-groups within groups, as group sizes increase and face-to-face interactions decrease. The concept of the 'nested system', or subsystem of a larger system, is helpful to understand the layers of systems within which, a group or team may operate (Thornton, 2016). Individuals are affected by all changes in

connected systems, or in the system as a whole, but not all are equally affected by every change. Managing the flow of information in and out of these layers of systems and its effect on group or team members may be complex.

Here, the concept of nested systems can help a coach or facilitator in a group to find a way through these complexities by locating the boundary where it is most usefully drawn. This is referred to as 'bounded instability' by Blackwell (1998) who suggested that confusion and anxiety can be transformed into a source of creativity through communication and dialogue. Coaches and facilitators in groups can work with the 'bounded instability' to enable group members to resolve problems when solutions are not obvious in groups or teams.

The systems theory highlights the collective extension of groups and the complexities of group dynamics which I had not fully apprehended before. Another essential aspect which I have been aware of, but had not fully considered, is the academic perspectives on recognising and acknowledging differences in groups rather than trying to manage them. With this deeper understanding of group processes and how individuals behave in groups, I have taken a fresh look at the action learning processes and the implications for effective facilitation of such groups, within the context of my research. Next, I think it is vital to consider how learning occurs, or can be promoted within the complex systems and subsystems in a group context.

2.3 Learning in Groups

Learning is a remarkably complex process that is influenced by a wide variety of factors. Why and how groups learn can be traced back to our origin as creatures who survived by being part of a group for survival, security and well-being. As a result, we are well-adapted to understanding non-conscious, non-verbal communication in groups and most of our responses appear to be automatic. Bandura (1977) integrated behavioural and cognitive theories of learning to provide a comprehensive model that could account for the wide range of learning experiences that occur in the real world; this is social learning theory. He suggests that learning can occur by observing a behaviour and the consequences of the behaviour, and the learner is not a passive recipient of information and is influenced by perceptions, behaviours and the environment.

Stern (2004: 76) also highlighted this aspect: he defines our ‘non-symbolic, non-verbal, procedural awareness’ as implicit knowing which enables us to:

‘feel it in our body and sense it in our minds, together.’ He suggests that our ‘nervous systems are constructed to be captured by the nervous system of others ...we resonate with and participate in their experience and they in ours’.

Thus, Thornton (2016) suggests that groups are particularly good at bringing these unnoticed aspects of knowledge into the conscious realm because the multiple perspectives of the individual members ‘amplify’ the communication and act as a reality check on each other. Thus, group learning activities often score highly over other professional development. From this perspective, it can be established that group learning opportunities, such as group or team coaching and action learning, offer the group members a far wider range of perceptions and responses. When communicating in groups, individual perceptions are always influenced and sometimes distorted, by personal previous experiences (Thornton, 2016). In addition, content messages may be loaded with clues about the person and their feelings (Kolb *et al.*, 1984). Here, acknowledgement of ‘differences’ may help individuals to make sense of their experiences of being members of a learning group (Reynold and Trehan, 2003). Sometimes, individuals project positive aspects of themselves and at other times projection can be a defensive mechanism, in which one can attribute parts of themselves that they do not like to others, unconsciously. Whether projection is positive or negative, they reduce self-awareness. Therefore, to ensure effective group learning, the first priority is to help individuals to address their basic assumptions (Bion, 1961) and recover their grip on present reality (Thornton, 2016). It requires a skilled group coach or facilitator to address and resolve such issues as and when they arise to maximise learning within a group.

Another essential ingredient to ensure group learning is blending enough safety in the relationship to enable an encounter with new information (Thornton, 2016). In psychological terms, this is referred to as ‘holding’, e.g. establishing a sense of safety in the relationship to be able to learn which enables the individual’s encounter with something new. The term ‘holding’ derives from Donald Winnicott’s (1965, 1971) work on the mother–baby relationship; the first learning relationship. He defined ‘holding’ as not just the actual physical holding of the infant, but also the total secure environment given by the mother to allow the baby to develop in the presence of the mother. That encounter is called ‘exchange’ and if the holding is good enough, exchange can happen (Thornton, 2016). The concept ‘containing’ is

closely allied to holding. Both theories are about development in the very early stages of life; holding is associated more with the total experience whereas containing focuses more on the metabolizing of frustration or discomforting experiences, the thoughts produced and how this is managed by individuals and within the group as a whole (Thornton, 2016). In a group context, 'holding' is about offering a sense of security to the individual in the group and making the experience 'containable'. 'Holding', therefore, is about containing differences and difficult emotions to allow group members to become aware of, digest and integrate them and this 'containing' is a crucial part of 'holding' (Thornton, 2016).

It remains much easier to learn when we feel fundamentally secure and valued (Thornton, 2016). Thornton (2016) suggests that where there is adequate holding, the group begins to find an appropriate level of mutual challenge (exchange). Therefore, keeping the group safe enough to enable learning and encouraging curiosity and exchange of views are key for effective group learning. Furthermore, team coaches, as well as action learning set facilitators, can explore difficult experiences and contain them at the same time. Thus, 'holding' becomes an integrating process and as group members begin to understand their feelings about work more fully, they can start to discriminate feelings generated by work from those of a more personal origin. This allows individuals to decide how or how not to act, based on a fuller understanding, including emotional, social, intellectual and factual information (Thornton, 2016).

Thornton (2016) establishes that, at the start of the group, the role of the group coach requires at least some active leadership to create a sense of safety, but as time goes on, the group members become more active and competent in the group process. As the sense of security and acceptance is established, the group itself can then become 'the container that helps transform incoherent and unconscious perceptions into coherent thought' (Nitsun, 1996: 123).

The role of the group coach gradually becomes more unobtrusive, while the group attends to the work, and is available if needed to help with overcoming new or reappearing obstacles and refining and deepening communication. Thus, the group coach's role is the boundary keeper; the person who holds the framework within which the group works and learns, recognising the social, emotional and political processes in play, acknowledging the differences and helping members to explore problems, new information and take action (Vince and Martin, 1993; Reynolds and Trehan, 2003; Thornton, 2016). Thus, the primary focus of the group coach is to maximise the quality of interactions in the group. If the group coach is seduced into focusing on the group's task, rather than help the group improve its functioning, then the emphasis on the group process may be lost (Thornton, 2016). To be able to hold a group, the group coach

must feel confident which is based on their experience of having been held in groups before and previous experiences of working productively with groups. Training, practice and supervision are key to developing and enhancing these skills (Thornton, 2016).

The aspects of group learning highlighted here, are relevant to the context of my research. From my own experience as a facilitator of action learning, concepts such as ‘exchange’, ‘holding’ and ‘containing’ are key processes within group learning and I need to raise my consciousness of behaviours and responses in play, within the action learning sessions. Also, I need to be aware that for some, groups may not be a safe place for ‘exchange’, or that some may want to maintain non-learning rather than learning. The awareness of such ‘differences’ is also a key role of the facilitator of group learning. These aspects within group learning, have influenced my choice of action research as an overarching research approach, as it will enable me to review my practice through an iterative process of planning and action followed by evaluation and review. Later, I will relate these concepts to my research findings and analysis. Next, as the core learning approach within the group context is experiential in nature, I will consider the theory of experiential learning and this method of learning in teams and groups.

2.4 Experiential Learning in Teams and Groups

Experiential learning is the process of learning through experience, and is more specifically seen as learning through reflection of doing. The roots of experiential team learning can be traced to Kurt Lewin (1946). His discovery of T-group highlighted the following three key components of an experiential learning approach: the pivotal role of reflective conversational space, the theory of functional role leadership and the experiential learning process. To learn from their experience, teams must create a conversational space where members can reflect on and talk about their experiences together. Lewin’s T-groups were based on a model of learning from experience, known as the laboratory method. This model was typically introduced by the group trainer as follows:

‘Our goal here is to learn from our experience as a group and thereby create the group we want to be. We will do this by sharing experiences together and reflecting on the meaning of these experiences for each of us. We will use these observations and reflections to create a collective understanding of our group, which will serve to guide us in acting to create the kind of group experience that we desire’.

This training model has been developed into a more general theory of learning in experiential learning within teams. Kolb (1984) developed the modern theory of experiential learning, drawing heavily on the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget. He defined experiential learning theory (ELT) as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984: 41). Kolb’s ELT model portrays two dialectically related modes of grasping experience: Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC). The model also includes two dialectically related modes of transforming experience: Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge, that involves a creative tension among the four learning modes that are responsive to contextual demands. This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral, where the learner ‘touches all the bases’, experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned. Immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts, from which new implications for action can be drawn, tested and served as guides in creating new experiences.

A closer examination of Kolb’s ELT model suggests that learning requires abilities that are polar-opposite. In grasping experience, some of us perceive new information through experiencing the tangible qualities of the world, relying on our senses and immersing ourselves in concrete reality. Others tend to perceive, grasp, or take hold of new information through symbolic representation, or abstract conceptualization where they think about, analyse, or systematically plan, rather than using sensation as a guide. Similarly, in transforming or processing experience, some of us tend to carefully watch others who are involved in the experience and reflect on what happens, whereas others choose to jump straight in and start doing things. The watchers favour reflective observation, whereas the doers favour active experimentation. Thus, each dimension of the learning process presents us with a choice and we make a choice based on our preferred way, which is influenced by our life experiences and our environment. This preference between concrete/abstract and between active/reflective is our “learning style” (Kolb, 1999a, 1999b). Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory (LSI; Kolb, 1999a, 1999b) was created to assess individual learning styles. The summary of the four basic learning styles is based on both research and clinical observation (Kolb, 1984, 1999a, 1999b), as shown in Figure 4; these styles are diverging, assimilating, converging and accommodating.

Kolb (1999a, 1999b) claims that the diverging style's dominant learning abilities are concrete experience and reflective observation. People with this learning style are best at viewing concrete situations from many different points of view. The assimilating style's dominant learning abilities are abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. People with this learning style are better at understanding a wider range of information and putting it into concise, logical form. The converging style's dominant learning abilities are abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. People with this learning style are better at finding practical uses for ideas and theories. The accommodating style's dominant learning abilities are concrete experience and active experimentation. People with this learning style learn primarily from "hands-on" experience.

To learn from its experience, a team or group must have members who can be involved and committed to the team and its purpose (concrete experience), engage in reflection and conversation about the team's experiences (reflective observation), engage in critical thinking about the team's work (abstract conceptualization) and make decisions and take action (active experimentation) (Kolb, 1984). In an idealized learning cycle or spiral, the learning group and its members "touch all the bases", experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting, in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation. Kolb (1984) concluded that teams and groups learn and develop through a creative tension among the four learning modes.

However, critics of the learning cycle suggest that there are other aspects to experiential learning that remain unexpressed in this model (Vince, 1998; Wierstra and de Jong, 2002; Coffield *et al.*, 2004). Some authors have analysed Kolb's LSI and have suggested other dimensions and configurations (Wierstra and de Jong, 2002; Coffield *et al.*, 2004). Vince (1998) observed that Kolb's model is based on individual experience and how this is affected by social reality, but does not take into account experiences which are also contracted, shaped and contained by social power relations. Vince (1998) suggests that no matter how much responsibility we take for learning from our own experience, we also still rely a great deal on learning from the experience of others. There is also a need to focus on the here and now experience as well as learning from past experiences. Another issue is that Kolb's cycle portrays learning experience as "very first-order orientated" (Cunningham, 1994: 40). But, learning is also a meta-level process, a second-order process that requires us to be "suspicious of our own suppositions" (Gergen, 1992: 185) and finding ways of working with underlying and unconscious processes, particularly defence mechanisms such as fears, anxieties and doubts, which are very common emotional experiences, especially during the beginning of the

learning (e.g. un-concentrated experience) (Vince, 1998). The work of Vince (1998) suggests that the emotion, at this point, can take the learning in two directions; one that promotes learning and the other that discourages it. Here, the process of ‘holding’, or risking the unknown, can lead to some form of generalised insight, although not necessarily one that is understood immediately, because it may be that the learning happens later. Vince’s (1998) themes of denial, anxiety, holding with the learning cycle demonstrate that it is through the acceptance of such fear and uncertainty and being able to ‘hold’ and ‘contain’ emotions such as anxiety that effective experimental learning can be achieved.

This resonates with me, both in my own experience as a learner and as a facilitator of learning because I have observed resistance as well as genuine anxiety in learners. The incorporation of such emotions within the experimental learning cycle has emerged as significant both in my practice and this research. Thus, I will consider the complexities of experiential learning by considering the notions of unconscious forces and aspects of power at both individual and team or group levels of learning.

In more recent research, Kayes *et al.*, (2005) identified learning, process and action as key components of team learning, along with purpose, membership, role leadership and context. Similar to Lewin (1946), they suggest that the team learning issues are best addressed by creating a *conversational space* that allows team members to develop and learn by following the experiential learning process. In the early stages of team formation, for example, it is essential to develop a climate of *trust and psychological safety* that encourages members to converse openly about their experience on the team, including their personal goals and their perception of the team’s purpose (concrete experience). Only then can the team *reflect and talk* through these issues together (reflective observation), synthesize them into a shared consensus that aligns individual and team goals (abstract conceptualization) and then *coordinate action* to define and implement specific goals (active experimentation). Schutz (1958) emphasized that for team members to feel included, there must be structure, connection and shared beliefs. From my experience, these aspects of experimental learning are replicated in action learning. I will specifically draw on the concept of the conversational space as a safe place for reflection and action and I will explore this aspect and the role of the facilitator in creating and sustaining this space in my research findings and analysis.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Kolb and Kolb (2009) later integrated the works of the foundational experiential learning scholars around six core propositions in experiential learning:

- (1) *Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.* To improve learning, the primary focus should be on engaging individuals in a process that best enhances their learning.
- (2) *All learning is re-learning.* Learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the individuals' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested and integrated with new, more refined ideas.
- (3) *Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.* Conflict, differences and disagreement are what drive the learning process. In the process of learning, one is called upon to move back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking.
- (4) *Learning is a holistic process of adaptation.* It is not just the result of cognition, but involves the integrated functioning of the total person – thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving.
- (5) *Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.* Stable and enduring patterns of human learning arise from consistent patterns of transaction between the individual and his or her environment. The way individuals process the possibilities of each new experience determines the range of choices and decisions he/she makes.
- (6) *Learning is the process of creating knowledge.* ELT proposes a constructivist theory of learning, whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner.

From my previous practitioner experience and my, more recent, experience as an action learning facilitator, some of these aspects of experiential learning in Kolb's later work resonate with me. For example, in action learning the significance of 'process' has become clearer to me through practice because I have realised that, as the facilitator, if I focus only on the outcome, it may be at the expense of enabling effective learning processes. Learning as a holistic process and the importance of creating an effective learning environment are key to enable learning. However, I am less comfortable with Kolb's suggestion of finding 'resolution of conflicts'; highlighted by his critiques (Cunningham, 1994; Vince, 1998), because the unconscious and defensive mechanism requires us to acknowledge such issues rather than just

manage and resolve them. I will therefore explore differences and emotions such as anxiety, fear and uncertainty in groups and the role of the facilitator within it and apply these fundamentals in my research findings and analysis. Next, I will review the current literature on the practice of facilitation as it is evident that the role of the facilitator is key in any group learning environment.

2.5 Practice of Facilitation

Although literature on the practice of facilitation is well established there are variations in the definitions of facilitation and the role of the facilitator. While Heron (1999) suggests that the facilitator has a role of helping and empowering participants to learn in an experiential group, Hogan (2000, 2005) believes that the facilitator can merely aim to provide some of the ‘conditions’ for empowerment to occur. Furthermore, Hogan (2000: 10) argues that “facilitation is concerned with encouraging open dialogue amongst individuals with different perspectives so that diverse assumptions and options may be explored”. A more directive approach is advocated by Spencer (1989: 11-12 as cited in Hogan, 2000: 49) as he suggests that the “facilitator’s role is to lead the group in drawing out answers, building a vision and developing plans that motivate everyone to achieve agreed upon goals...”. This is contradicted by Heron (1999: 2) as he places “primary responsibility with the self-directing learner and only secondary responsibility with the facilitator”.

The difference in these definitions highlights that facilitation may be used for specific purposes (e.g. ‘to have a conversion’, ‘to learn’, ‘to explore assumptions’ or ‘to achieve agreed goals’) and that the role of the facilitator may also vary accordingly (e.g. helping, empowering, encouraging, guiding and leading). Thus, the variations in the definitions can be attributed to the difference in purpose and context which in turn suggests that there is no right technique or way to ‘do’ facilitation (Hunter *et al.*, 1993; Heron, 1999; Hogan, 2000, 2005). I have reviewed various models of facilitation, below, to consider the key aspects involved in facilitation.

2.5.1 The Heron Model of Facilitation Styles

Heron (1977, 1999) has contributed significantly to the facilitation literature by offering a set of useful models and frameworks. In 1977, he first developed a model of ‘facilitator styles’

with six facilitation dimensions – planning (goal oriented, workforce, succession, talent planning), meaning (helping to make sense of internal and external environment), confronting (challenging, raising awareness), feelings (emotional dimensions) and structuring (processes, procedures, ways of learning in organisations). Heron added another dimension to this model: that of power and how it may be allocated or distributed in a group via hierarchical, cooperative and autonomous decision modes of facilitation. This relates to ‘social power relations’ (Vince, 1998) and how this shapes experiential learning. The **Hierarchical Mode: Direction** is when the facilitator directs the learning and group process and does things for the group and plans what they do. The **Cooperative Mode: Negotiation** is when the power is shared between the facilitator and the group members. The facilitator works with the group and ideas are shared. The **Autonomous Mode: Delegation** is when the power is shifted to the participants to take responsibility. This does not mean abdication of responsibility. ‘It is the subtle art of creating conditions within which people can exercise full self-determination’ (Heron, 1989: 17). Autonomy may be conferred by the facilitator to the group, it may evolve by negotiations between the facilitator and the group, or it may be seized by group (Heron, 1999).

Heron emphasised the need to be flexible as a facilitator. The whole system of dimensions and modes, according to Heron (1989, 1999), is linked to the level of human intention based on ethical values, norms and principles, which he elaborates in his seven ‘criteria of excellence’, by which the competency of a facilitator may be judged: **Authority:** to have ‘distress-free authority’ when making group interventions, e.g. without displacing his/her own pathology onto the individual or the group.

Confrontation: to supportively confront individuals and/or groups when necessary, about defensive or rigid behaviour. **Orientation:** to give a clear, conceptual orientation to experimental work, when appropriate. **Care:** to be caring, empathic, genuine.

Range of Methods: to be able to handle deep regression, catharsis and transpersonal work and have a repertoire of appropriate techniques and exercises available.

Respect of Persons: to respect ‘the autonomy of the individual and the right of the individual to choose when to change and grow’ (1999: 340). **Flexibility of Intervention:** to be able to move within the modes and dimensions described in his model.

In considering these criteria, I can relate fully to care, respect and flexibility of the learning facilitator, but, I have some disagreement with ‘distress-free authority’, ‘confrontation’ and the expectation that facilitators should be able to handle regression, catharsis and transpersonal work. My concern is more with the language and interpretation than the overall message. For

example, is it possible to be ‘distress-free’? If this is about managing one’s own emotions, then from my experience this awareness is crucial and relates to locating a boundary within complexities (Blackwell, 1998). My preferred approach would be enabling and empowering, rather than confronting, though Heron (1999) does refer to being ‘supportive and helpful’ as well. Not all facilitators may have experience in transpersonal and regression work and such work may not be required in all contexts.

Heron (1993) further developed his thesis on group facilitation by introducing the concept of the three types of authority available to the facilitator: tutelary, political and charismatic. The facilitator with tutelary authority has ‘mastery of some kind of knowledge and skill and of appropriate methods of passing it on, effective communication to learners through the written and spoken word and other presentations, competent care of learners and guardianship of their needs and interests’ (Heron, 1993: 17). Political authority relates to the decisions made by the facilitator, regarding the content, methods and timings of learning. Heron advocated the need to involve the learners in such decision making. Charismatic authority is the ability of the facilitator to influence the learners and the learning process by his or her presence, style and manner. Heron (1993) argues that facilitators can learn to centre their physical being by being ‘fully present’. This concept relates to mindfulness which I have adopted in my facilitation of action learning. I will consider ‘mindfulness’ as a method in supporting group learning, specifically in action learning, later in this chapter. The above classificatory conceptual analysis of various aspects of facilitation is useful to understand the ‘ideal type’ of facilitator and will contribute to my analysis of the role of the facilitator in action learning.

2.5.2 International Association of Facilitators (IAF)

As facilitation has started to emerge as a professional discipline, skills and competencies of a facilitator have become an urgent requirement (Hogan, 2000). In response, the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) who promote, support and advance the art and practice of professional facilitation have developed a Core Facilitator Competency Framework. The Core Facilitator Competencies Framework was developed over several years by the IAF with the support of its members and facilitators from all over the world. The competencies form the basic set of skills, knowledge and behaviours that facilitators must have in order to be successful in facilitating in a wide variety of environments (**Appendix 3**). The model categorises desirable skills, knowledge and attitudes in relation to facilitation; It includes:

collaborative working with groups, participative procedures and environment, guiding groups to appropriate and useful outcomes, as well as maintaining professional knowledge and attitude. Although the long list of competencies may be daunting to new facilitators, the framework is comprehensive, which recognises and illustrates the complexities of facilitation. I have referred to the International Association of Facilitators' Competency framework in the final analysis of my research (Chapter 5).

2.5.3 The Kiser Masterful Model of Facilitation

Kiser (1998) presents a very different model of facilitation, taking a more linear, time-oriented approach (Fig. 6). Kiser's model draws attention to the fact that different functions are allocated at different stages of the process, of which facilitating a group is only a part of. He suggests that the facilitator may have to adapt, or even abandon, the intervention strategy planned in phase 3, based on the needs of the group. He emphasised that participative feedback is integral to the facilitation process. As his main focus is associated with working with groups or teams in large organisations, he gives considerable attention to the organisational context within which group facilitation is taking place. This will be an important consideration in the context of this research as the action learning members are within a large public-sector organisation and organisational dynamics and cultures may affect individual and group learning.

2.5.4 The Hunter Model of Facilitation

Hunter *et al.*'s, (1999) model focuses on the essence of facilitation distinguishing between purpose (e.g. direction) and culture (e.g. process). It represents the link between facilitating self, one to one and one to group. The authors emphasise the role of the facilitator to help the group to achieve its purpose and suggest a series of questions: Where are we? Where do we go from here? Why are we here? What results are we here to achieve? To focus on the purpose at the various stages of facilitation, the authors emphasise the need to get groups to put forward its purpose, in its own words, as a useful tool to focus the group. From my own experience of facilitation, this is a useful model for the facilitator to analyse what is happening and the set of where, why and what questions can enable members to reflect and consider appropriate actions.

2.5.5 The Hogan Living Frame of Facilitation

Hogan's (2002) living frame of facilitation provides an alternative way of illustrating the complexities of facilitation. The author offers a pictorial 'frame' of the facilitator's personal context, purpose, influence, values, as well as skills and capabilities. Although based on the personal view of the author, the is helpful as an overview of the various aspects involved in facilitation and is an *aide mémoire* for self-evaluation.

Overall, these models help to make the role of the facilitator more explicit and I will consider these models to underpin my own framework of facilitation. However, from my perspective, each practitioner's 'living frame' may vary because facilitation is also influenced by the practitioner's formative experiences and world view, as well as one's overarching professional principles (i.e. one's way of doing things) and by the contexts in which the facilitation is taking place. Hogan (2002) suggests that there are many styles of facilitation that derive from a person's personality. Hunter *et al.*, (1999) state that 'as a facilitator, you will be most effective when you are being your natural self and allowing your own personality to be expressed' (1992: 72). Thus, these models and techniques will be drawn upon and the values that inform a facilitator's practice are considered in this research.

2.6 Action Learning (AL)

The key themes taken from the 'generic' literature on facilitation, discussed above, can be applied to the facilitation on action learning, which is the context of my research. The facilitation of AL is used by the human resource development community to solve problems, develop leaders and build teams. It is a method for individual and organisational development, based on small groups of colleagues meeting over time to tackle real problems. Its roots are in adult learning and organisational development, ensuring that individuals can continue to be supported in their roles and learn from colleagues.

Action Learning was originally developed as an approach, specifically for developing managers by Revans (1980). His view was that learning is a social process in which managers, who are faced with real life 'messy problems', will learn best with and from others. Dilworth and Wills (2003: 11) define it as a:

‘process of reflecting on one’s work and beliefs in the supportive, as well as confrontational, environment of one’s peers for the purpose of gaining new insights and resolving real business and community problems in real time’.

This emphasis on learning and taking action, for example problem solving, within the AL process is one of the challenges frequently debated in the AL literature (Rigg, 2015). For Revans (1998: 14), the two cannot be separated as he noted, “there can be no action without learning and no learning without action”. Other authors, such as O’Neil and Marsick (2007) and Pedler (2011), also highlight this balance, suggesting that AL enables participants to use work projects or problems in organisations to learn. O’Neil and Marsick (2007: 203) talk about AL as:

‘An approach to working with and developing people that uses work on an actual project or problem as the way to learn. Participants work in small groups to take action to solve their problem and learn how to learn from that action. Often a learning coach works with the group in order to help the members learn how to balance their work with the learning from that work’.

More recently, Leonard (2015) clarifies the relationship between action, learning and solutions within the AL process, by arguing that the first purpose of AL should be to achieve effective and creative solutions to complex, critical and urgent problems. Thus, action learning is underpinned by a belief in individual potential; a way of learning from our actions and from what happens to us and around us, by taking the time to question, understand and reflect to gain insights from the actions and consider how to act in the future. Sofo *et al.*, (2010) also confirm that action learning seeks to promote double-loop learning through ill-structured and complex problems. Such problems are common in organizational contexts and the type of learning that ensues, is often a precursor to an action that can affect both the learner and his or her environment (McLoughlin, 2004; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009). Edmonstone (2017: 6) also highlights that AL learning is focused on improving organisational and/or personal effectiveness through a ‘virtuous learning cycle’.

However, the problem of defining action learning persists and remains a challenge (Brook *et al.*, 2012). As Pedler (1997) remarks: ‘Action learning may be a simple idea, but only at the philosophical level’ (1997a: 248), whilst Johnson (2010) allude to action learning as being shrouded in obscurity, even from its earliest beginnings. Part of the difficulty, as Pedler (1997) and others have observed, is that Revans (1980; 1982; 1998) offered no single definition,

specifying only ‘what action learning is not’. Marsick and O’Neil (2007) observed that the very simplicity of the core ideas of action learning leaves it open to many interpretations.

As the practice of AL has developed in recent years and action learning facilitation is now widely used as a learning intervention for leadership and organisational development (Boshyk, 2002; O’Neil and Marsick, 2007; Raelin 2008; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009), in some ways, the popularising of action learning as a means of development is at the heart of misunderstandings relating to its philosophy and approach. According to Weinstein (1995: 32), ‘one of the problems of describing action learning is that it means different things to different people’, which is not surprising, as variations in the definition of AL clearly imply this difference.

As derived from the consistencies in Revans writings (1980; 1982; 1998), who is often considered the “father” of action learning, conventional or classical action learning adheres to certain key principles (Pedler *et al.*, 2005: 58–9):

- The requirement for action as a basis for learning.
- Profound personal development, resulting from reflection upon action.
- Working with problems (no right answers) not puzzles (susceptible to expert knowledge).
- Problems being sponsored and aimed at organizational, as well as personal development.
- Action learners working in sets of peers (‘comrades in adversity’) to support and challenge each other.
- The search for fresh questions and ‘Q’ (questioning insight) takes primacy over access to programmed knowledge or expert knowledge or ‘P’).

Thus, Revans (1983) perceived learning to be based on the interaction between two kinds of learning: Programmed Knowledge (P), which is the input of knowledge or skills and Questioning (Q), which is the process of exploring such knowledge in practice. This allowed him to formulate the equation:

$$L = P + Q$$

His structure of the action learning approach to reflection on experience has five successive stages which include observation, provisional hypothesis, trial or experiment, audit and review. However, this learning cycle, as in the case of Kolb’s learning cycle (1984), does not consider the emotional and intellectual realities of action learning (Vince and Martin, 1993). These

authors suggest that there are aspects of individual experiences of learning that are filtered through emotional and psychological history; shaped through group processes and conditioned by broader forces of power within an organisation or system. Revans (1983) action learning cycle makes an assumption that emotions, like fear and anxiety, are managed separately from the issue of addressing the work task. The model also fails to consider aspects of power and oppression which is possible within learning. Such exclusion dismisses the process of individual and group defensiveness against learning which is present in learning groups. Vince and Martin's (1993) 5-stage development processes recognising emotional, political as well as rational processes which may occur in action learning. They take into account what the AL members feel about their experiences, rather than what they think or perceive about their experience. Edmonstone (2017: 108) also confirms that 'anxiety is an integral part of being a set member (and a set facilitator) and can contribute to both the success and failure of sets'. I believe that these authors consider the emotional reality that is constantly present in learning groups, such as AL. My experience confirms the authors claim that sometimes individuals can struggle with the consequences of sharing their feelings in a group as they may be concerned about others' reaction at sharing something, which they had suppressed, as well their own emotion. Here, the role of the facilitator and the supportive learning environment may be able to make a difference; the 'holding' and 'containing' discussed earlier can help and empower individuals, leading to 'insight or increased authority'. However, Vince and Martin (1993) observed that sometimes the risk may seem too great and individuals may become defensive and show resistance, leading to denial, avoidance and 'willing ignorance'. This aspect of the participants 'emotions' within the action learning process will be a key focus of my research inquiry.

Marquardt and Waddill (2004) assert that the power and success of learning, which occurs in action learning, can be attributed to the fact that it incorporates multiple perspectives and many disparate theories of learning. In their conceptual analysis and synthesis, they illustrate how the theories and principles of five different adult learning orientations (e.g. cognitivist, behaviourist, humanist, constructivist and social learning) contribute to the learning power of action learning, as each of the learning orientations offer a different perspective and insight into each of the following six dimensions of action learning: a problem; a diverse group or set; a reflective inquiry process; power to take action; commitment to learning; action learning coach.

The difference here, lies in the emphasis on the use of an action learning coach. Marquardt (2004) discovered that if one of the group members (referred to as the action learning coach) focuses solely on the group's learning and not on the problem, the group will become effective more quickly, both in problem-solving abilities and in group interaction. However, it is important to note that Revans (1998, 2011) was wary of action learning groups, becoming dependent on facilitators or professional educators, as he felt that this could hinder the group's growth. To offset this potential negative impact, Marquardt and Waddill (2004) observed that action learning coaches should only ask questions relating to the learning of the group, individuals and the organisation. Moreover, they must have the wisdom and self-restraint to let the participants learn for themselves and from each other. Revans (1980: 9) also noted the value of this approach when he stated, 'The clever man will tell you what he knows; he may even try to explain it to you. The wise man encourages you to discover it for yourself'. Thus, the role of the coach or facilitator is an important consideration in action learning. Therefore, next, I will explore the role of the facilitator in AL, which is the key focus of my research.

2.7 Role of Facilitator in Action Learning

An important aspect of action learning is the 'coaching', whereby a designated action learning coach, through critical questions, helps group members to make connections between learning and work experience, which then promotes action, enabling members to perform their tasks more effectively (Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Pedler, 2005; Lawless, 2008; Ram and Trehan, 2009). Other authors, such as Marquardt *et al.*, (2009) and Rimanoczy and Turner (2008) also support the use of an action learning coach to sensitively and clearly establish the structure, rules and pace of the sessions. O'Neil and Marsick (2014) have used the concepts of 'schools' of action learning to bring some order into the practice of action learning, which is inductively derived from the literature and categorised by the way in which action learning practitioners view whether learning takes place in action learning (2014: 204). O'Neil and Marsick (2014) highlight that in the Tacit and Scientific schools of action learning, there is little emphasis on the use of a 'coach' to enable learning, as the focus is primarily on action and results. However, within the Experiential and Critical Reflection schools of action learning, the authors believe that the role of an action learning coach is critical (O'Neil and Marsick; 2014). These authors highlight a number of reasons for this within their literature, such as: the participants' inability to recognizing their own assumptions and patterns of thought and behaviour (Boud and Walker, 1996), impatience and discomfort with one's own practice (Marsick and Maltbia, 2009) and inability to questioning (Cho and Bong, 2010). O'Neil and Marsick (2014) advocate that an

action learning coach or facilitator can support participants to overcome these barriers and ensure an explicit focus on ‘learning how to learn’ by supporting their abilities to diagnose patterns (even though context varies), recognize how the new situation differs and adjust or create new responses through questioning and reflection (2014: 206).

According to authors such as Marquardt *et al.*, (2009) and Edmonstone (2017), questioning is the life blood of action learning because questions are seen as the most effective tool to understand the complexity of the problem, to develop innovative strategies, build team cohesiveness and develop the leadership skills of group’s members. Thornton (2016) also highlights that questioning is the primary medium of exchange. Powerful questions enable members to reflect on their thinking while acting, thus, creating truly reflective practitioners (Schön, 1991). O’Neil and Marsick (2007) suggest that the questions asked by the coach need to be both supportive and challenging. The authors encourage the use of four kinds of questions; objective, reflective, interpretative and decisional. Objective questions centre on “What is happening?”; Reflective questions probe “How am I feeling/reacting?”; Interpretative questions seek to answer “What does it mean?” and “What are we learning?”; Decisional questions focus on “What do I do?” and “How do I respond?” (O’Neil and Marsick, 2014: 212). Other authors, such as Cho and Bong (2010), Sofo *et al.*, (2010) and Gibson (2011) also agree that the coach can foster an attitude of inquiry through questioning. In addition, the coach helps participants to learn how to ask the “right” questions and through these questions, learn how to think in new ways (Pedler, 1991; Hoe, 2011).

Literature on AL clearly establishes that reflection is another integral part of how learning happens in AL. It is accepted that reflection is intrinsically bound to questioning as it is often guided by good questions (O’Neil and Marsick, 2007). According to Boud *et al.*, (1996), ‘reflection consists of those processes in which learners engage to recapture, notice and re-evaluate their experience, to work with their experience’, in order ‘to turn it into learning’ (1996:9). O’Neil and Marsick (2014) point out that some benefits of reflection may be lost if it is not linked to experience and action. They also suggest that reflection is not an end, and in action learning reflection is directly linked to learning and action (2014:208).

In the Experiential School of Action Learning, the coach helps support the team’s learning throughout their learning cycles (O’Neil and Marsick, 2014). Kolb’s (1984) learning styles can help a coach to identify different learning styles and intervene when appropriate to ensure learning occurs. Sofo (2006) suggests that action learning coaches produce a divergent form of

learning, which complements the kinds of learning that take place, most frequently, in organizations. *de Haan and de Ridder* (2006) agree, that this appears to make divergent learning particularly conducive to periods and places of uncertainty, ambiguity and change, which is what characterizes action learning. Thus, the primary focus of the coach role is not to teach or provide expert perspective, but to create conditions under which participants might learn from their project work and from one another (O'Neil and Marsick, 2014: 207). Tolerance of ambiguity, openness, frankness, patience and empathy are some of the key qualities required by the facilitator for this (Edmonstone, 2017).

The AL coach tries to primarily use questions, rather than give answers, as the way of working with the team (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007). Reflection is also key to help ensure that what is learned through the experience of working on the project is explicit and planned, rather than erratic and half-hearted (Mumford, 1996).

In Critical Reflection School of Action Learning, the coach plays an important part in the creation of opportunities for learning from critical reflection (O'Neil, 1999; O'Neil and Marsick, 2014). For example, as an AL coach is not a team member, and often comes from outside the culture, he or she can be freer to ask questions from an outsider's perspective, as he or she is not immersed in the organization's values and norms and is not constrained by political issues (Rigg, 2006). Casey (2011), in his seminal work on set advising (AL coaching), speaks of the need for a coach to challenge a team in order to help them think differently. Thus, the coach's capability to 'hold' difficult conversations is indispensable in promoting learning (Winnicott, 1965, 1971; Thornton, 2016). As critical reflection is at the core of AL, and in reflecting on my own practice as an AL facilitator, I will explore the subject of reflectivity and reflexivity later in this literature review.

According to Casey (2011) and O'Neil and Marsick (2007, 2014), another aspect to be considered is that, before learning can happen, sufficient trust is needed for participants to feel they can take risks such as: exposing personal information, questioning themselves and others in the team, engaging in reflection and challenging the organization. The coach ensures equity among members as well as efficiency and accountability for results in both process and outcomes. *Sofo et al.*, (2010: 206) establishes that 'the coach is not a teacher or training manager delivering classroom-based problem solving or interventions', neither are they 'a work supervisor who has accountabilities in terms of productivity and efficiency'. *Bruner et al.*, (1997) suggest that the coach ideally is an independent person who has the capacity to

guide group members in how to learn, listen, use empathy, identify and challenge assumptions, reflect critically, reframe issues, receive and give feedback effectively and think reflectively. Edmonstone (2017: 80) refers to the activities of support offered by the AL facilitator as ‘emotional warmth’ and challenges assumptions, perceptions and mind-sets as the ‘light’ to the learning process.

The role of the action learning coach also requires assisting members to focus on what they are achieving and finding difficult, what processes they are using and the implications of these processes (Sofo *et al.*, 2010: 217). Without a coach, all of this would be left to chance and to the accidental or serendipitous application of process skills by group members (Marquardt *et al.*, 2009). Sofo *et al.*, (2010: 217) suggests that ‘the action learning coach should be sensitive to and allow time for group members to understand the external, as well as internal environments. These authors establish that action learning coaches can guide teams and groups to reflect on what they can influence and control, as well as how they can learn continually from their shared experiences. According to Bruner *et al.*, (1997), action learning coaches need to intervene at appropriate times to motivate, advise and educate the AL members, in order to enable them to reflect on the efforts, strategies, knowledge and skills generated within the AL set. The coach helps the group to reflect on the possible performance and problem-solving levels they can attain as individuals, teams and as an organization (Sofo, 2006; Sofo *et al.*, 2010).

Several authors refer to the importance of creating an environment for learning by the AL coach. Lamm (2000) found that participants needed an open, trusting and supportive environment for transformative learning to happen. Other authors, such as Teekman (2000), O’Neil and Marsick (2007) suggests that creating an environment for learning requires specific action learning interventions such as emphasis on confidentiality and a supportive environment. Anderson and Thorpe (2004) and Sofo *et al.*, (2010) also highlight that the coach needs to create an encouraging environment that is safe, confidential and empowering for individuals, where the members feels they own the solutions, can challenge each other by asking questions and engage in reflective inquiry and powerful actions.

O’Neil and Marsick (2014) make a significant contribution to the AL literature by annotating several sources that explain the AL coaching role in metaphors. O’Neil (1999, 2001), in her research on learning coaches, found that one of the key differentiators of these AL coaches was that they created different meanings around their roles in AL, that served to frame much of

their interaction with members. O'Neil and Marsick (2014) point out that the coach's background, values and attitudes helped to influence these meanings. In their article, the authors describe the metaphors as follows: The Consecrated/Religious Advisor is described as submerging or subordinating his or her needs to that of the group (O'Neil, 1999). Here, the authors agree with Lawrence (1991) and Mumford (1996), who suggest the role is not to teach or to provide expert advice and opinion, but to provide conditions under which managers might learn from their own project work and from each other. On the other hand, according to O'Neil (1999), the Radicals saw themselves as enabling participants to become empowered and challenge authority. This relates to Marwick's (1990) and Weinstein's (1995) use of phrases, such as challenging norms and leading process level to a "deeper" learning level, to describe the role of the coach.

But does the coach have to be a 'holy' or a consecrated person to support the learners? And, a 'radical' facilitator would have to consider the context, consequences and the readiness of the learners to become empowered and challenge authority. Also, the 'wizard' (Sewerin, 1997) and 'the Benedictine and the Jesuit' (Casey, 1991) metaphors have religious and mythological connotations, which may not be fully understood, or may be misinterpreted by those of other faiths and ethnic backgrounds. In my view, these metaphors are interesting when considering the characteristics of the coach, but other metaphors, which may be more inclusive and have a wider appeal, may be a useful contribution. Here, I would add the 'mindful facilitator' to this list. As an element of 'mindfulness' practice was integrated within the action learning process of the MHT leadership and management programme, I am keen to understand the impact of the mindfulness exercises on the facilitators and their facilitation of the sessions. I have reviewed the concept of mindfulness in more detail and related it to my research. I will relate mindfulness practice to AL facilitation in my research findings and conclusions.

Overall, the literature on AL highlights that the interaction of the 'action learning coach' seeks to open minds to a deeper level, aimed at self-discovery through one's own experience and critical reflection (O'Neil and Marsick, 2014). Rigg (2006: 199) makes the case, for what she terms 'bilingualism', in executing the role of facilitator and argues that there is value to be had in shifting the balance between process and expert facilitation: 'in the sense that facilitators, especially in a public-sector context, speak both a public policy language as well as that of learning and development'. For Rigg (2006: 200), the ultimate value is a facilitator who is skilled enough to combine these twin capabilities and who becomes able, potentially at any rate, 'to generate knowledge about the wider organisation or wider system they are working

with'. Hence, in practice, the idea of questioning insight to complex emotions, unconscious processes and the offering up of challenges to existing power and a more active facilitation role are an essential requirement in critical action learning (Vince and Martin, 1993; Vince, 2004, 2008). For Reynolds (1998), critical reflection is distinguished from other forms of reflection by being concerned with questioning assumptions, having a social rather than an individual focus, paying particular attention to the analysis of power relations and being concerned with emancipation. Thus, the role of facilitation marks a key distinction, especially for critical action learning, as it puts more emphasis on the role of an expert facilitator. Here, Hogan's (2000, 2005) emphasis on empowerment as a facilitator role, and the need for the facilitator to encourage open dialogue to address diverse assumptions, is clearly transferable in the action learning context.

Pedler and Abbott (2013) highlight that a key role of an action learning practitioner is that of a 'set adviser' who works with the set members to help the set to become an effective source of action, learning and reflection. This involves encouraging the development of skills, such as presenting issues, listening, questioning, reflecting and acting. Thornton and Yoong (2011) refer to the role of a 'blended action learning facilitator' within an ICT supported leadership programme, in the New Zealand educational sector. Accordingly, in this research, a contributor to the success of this programme was this role, which involved enabling learning and acting as a 'trusted inquisitor'; this position required supporting and challenging participants in their leadership learning.

This perspective of developmental learning through interaction with an experienced professional can be related to the concept of 'social constructivism', where knowledge is constructed in collaboration with another. The importance of a social context for cognitive development was first highlighted by Vygotsky (1978) in his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) where he identified the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help from someone with more experience. Many constructivist theories agree with Vygotsky's belief that meaning is socially negotiated (Driscoll 2000). Bruner (1996) also viewed learning through a constructivist lens; he believed that learning is an active process and the learner should be encouraged to discover principles for themselves. This has influenced my research philosophy and epistemologically and as a result, I will consider a constructivist research philosophy to construct meaning using interpretist approaches as the theoretical perspective and focus on the actions and experiences of the research participants.

Next, as the role of the coach in the context of team learning and development is another group facilitation process, where the learner is supported within a group or team, I have explored team coaching as a learning intervention to understand the similarities and differences between team coaching and action learning facilitation and the role of the coach within it.

2.8 Team Coaching

Team coaching is now a growing trend and service in the field of coaching. It is defined as a comprehensive and systemic approach to support a team and maximise their collective talent and resources to effectively accomplish the work of the team (Hackman and Wageman, 2005; Hawkins, 2011; Carr and Peters, 2013). As within action learning, the role of the coach is critical in team coaching. Reddy (1994: 8) defines this role as a “reasoned and intentional intervention, into the on-going events and dynamics of a group, with the purpose of helping that group effectively attain its agreed-upon objectives”. Hackman and Wageman (2005) also places a key focus on team tasks and suggest team coaching enables direct interaction with a team, intended to help members make more coordinated and task-appropriate use of their collective resources in accomplishing the team’s work. Hawkins (2011) agrees that the team coach works with the whole team to improve *collective* performance by engaging with their key stakeholder groups.

Clutterbuck (2009: 97) on the other hand, defines team coaching as “helping the team improve performance and the processes by which performance is achieved, through reflection and dialogue”. According to this perspective, a team coach is more emergent within the team and helps with the quality of thinking rather than leading towards a specific realisation. The coach helps the team build their longer-term skills and capacity to manage new challenges from their own resources (Clutterbuck, 2009). He offers a useful distinction between facilitation and coaching, noting that facilitation creates a space for dialogue (as in action learning), whereas team coaching requires additional assessment, feedback, consultative direction and a focus on team performance. Clutterbuck (2009, 2010) addresses the tension between whether a team coach focuses on relationship or structure, in an inclusive and balanced way, and suggests working with relationship factors in the service of performance goals may be a wise direction for team coaches to follow. These definitions show that the purpose of team or group coaching is to support and help the group or team members over time; group coaching involves meeting on a number of occasions, with the opportunity to sustain and build on previous learning. What

is distinctive here is that the relationship is multiple; each member of the group can relate to the coach, to each other, as members or as a whole group which adds to learning choices, opportunities and possibilities. However, the definitions also highlight that the emphasis of team or group coaching may vary, such as accomplishing team tasks with use of their collective resources (Hackman and Wageman, 2005), improving performance through reflection and dialogue (Clutterbuck, 2009) and learning and development of new skills and capabilities (Thornton, 2106). Thus, the purpose of coaching may vary and will determine the role and task of the coach.

2.8.1 Team Coaching and Learning Group Coaching

Thornton (2016) makes a distinction between team coaching and learning group coaching. In team coaching, common learning goals are important; this does not preclude individual feedback and learning, but requires it. However, individual learning is in the interest of the team achieving its shared purpose. In a learning group, the group's goal is self-directed learning for its individual members. The variety of goals together with the commitment to aid each other's learning results in a deep cross-fertilising learning experience. The richness of the learning arises from the fact that learners set and work actively on different learning goals. In such groups, members can share profound insights and significantly refine their collaborative and interpersonal skills. In fact, according to Thornton (2016), in a successful learning group these outcomes are inevitable. An effective group coach should be able to hold many levels of interaction and be aware of interacting factors, such as understanding the individual in the group, as well as the organisational life and specific work context of the individual.

2.8.2 The Role of the 'Coach' in Team and/or Group Coaching

Hackman and Wageman's research (2005) highlight that it is of primary importance that team coaching is provided by a competent team coach, along with it being at the right time and in the right circumstance. They provide specific examples of process intervention or action that the coach may take. Such coaching behaviours include: creating and holding the members accountable to agreed team actions, acknowledging and reinforcing productive discussion and communication behaviours and pausing discussions to allow for team reflection (Wageman, *et al.*, 2008). Clutterbuck (2007) noted that coaching business teams is not a simple process and that the coaches need to be pragmatic and responsive to their teams. Hawkins (2011: 86-99)

offers a five Cs model which is useful for practitioners to follow: i) commissioning and re-commissioning, ii) clarifying, iii) co-creating, iv) connecting and v) core-learning. The two teams in Carr and Peters's (2013) research, explicitly identified that the relationship with the team coach and the coach's manner, in particular, helped create a safe learning environment. Furthermore, there is a growing body of research in coaching and an extensive body of research in counselling that reaffirms the link between a positive working alliance with the coach/counsellor and positive client outcomes (Horvath and Symonds, 1991; Marshall, 2006). Thus, it is clear that the role of the 'coach' or facilitator is of utmost importance in maximising learning both at individual and group level.

2.8.3 'Coaching' in Action Learning

Although the main role of AL coaches takes place within the context of an AL programme and is focused on creating situations for learning, rather than helping an individual or team improve performance (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007), there are similarities in some of the processes used in AL coaching to other types of coaching. For example, the work that AL coaches do at the process level is similar to the work undertaken by team coaches within organisational teams. There are also similarities between the work an AL coach does with participants for personal development and for one-on-one work with individuals. However, O'Neil and Marsick (2007) suggests that AL coaches engage teams at the process level and then go beyond that, to a learning level: 'It's different. As a process consultant you are floating with the process. You are helping people to stay in it and be aware of what is happening. As a learning coach . . . you are on many more levels' (O'Neil, 1999:128). Next, I have undertaken a comparative analysis of these two interventions.

2.8.4 Team Coaching and Action Learning Coaching - a Comparative Analysis

Vaartjes (2005) paper is valuable because it is one of the only articles that offer a comparative analysis of the theoretical frameworks underlying coaching and action learning. In this section, I have drawn from this work significantly. Vaartjes (2005) agrees with Seiler (2003) and Maturana (1988), that the coaching approach is founded on the assumption of a coherent, interrelated model of a human 'way of being', which encompasses language, emotions and physiology (body). According to Flaherty (1999), coaching is a developmental approach. He claims that behaviour is a manifestation of an individual's 'structure of interpretation...it's not the events, communication, or stimuli that lead to behaviour, it is the interpretation an

individual gives to the phenomenon that leads to the actions taken' (1999: 9). Consequently, Vaartjes (2005) establishes that learning and change is possible within the coaching relationship, when an individual becomes aware of the limitations of their structure of interpretation and takes purposeful steps to alter the structure so that subsequent actions lead to more desirable outcomes. Several authors have highlighted this belief that the intrinsic human capacity for creativity, resourcefulness and growth-oriented change is a core coaching approach (Whitworth *et al.*, 1998; Eggers and Cark, 2000). My own experience has shown that the coach, through conversation and inquiry, helps individuals and groups to find the answer.

Action learning, on the other hand, seeks to make “meaning from experience” (Raelin, 1997:26) for the purpose of creating a different relational reality. Learning is seen as a social process, facilitated by questioning insight and reflection on action (Passfield, 1996), with emphasis on surfacing the honest accounts of participants, relative to their current context and issues. Thus, the theoretical framework of action learning is founded on the assumption that ‘knowledge is socially constructed and created from within, and for, a particular group and context’ (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002: 5). This emphasis on questioning insight and critical reflection, is a distinguishing feature of action learning. In contrast, team coaching tools and models are often used to enable team analysis and address difficult team conversations, although experienced team coaches avoid over reliance on such tools.

According to Vaartjes (2005), the implication is that, in both coaching and action learning, individuals have the innate capacity for change and that change can be facilitated through processes that support inquiry into their individual constructions and social interpretations, together with processes that support experience of alternative constructions. The author suggested that the coach is clearly accountable for effective application of process; however, accountability for the achievement of results belongs to the members of the group or team. In this way, individuals may be active in creating alternative (and preferred) realities and the coach supports the achievement of change by enhancing the client’s capacity for, and commitment to, purposeful action to achieve desired outcomes (2005:5).

Overall, team coaching and action learning are both relationally based developmental processes; both occur over time and often over many months to support consolidation and integration of learning into practice. Drawing on current literature, Sanyal and Gray (forthcoming, 2018) identified some core themes that are common to action learning and team coaching.

1. Building a Learning Environment and a Trusting Relationship

In both interventions, the role of the coach to establish and maintain a trusting relationship with and amongst the members and to create a mutually satisfying environment of respect, trust and freedom of expression (Flaherty, 1999; O'Neil and Marsick, 2007). The coach achieves these aims by remaining politically neutral (Goglio *et al.*, 1998), approaching the members with unconditional positive regard (Eggers and Clark, 2000) and by enabling them to recognise their own assumptions, diagnose patterns and create new responses through questioning and reflection (O'Neil and Marsick, 2014). Thus, the personal qualities, knowledge, experience and skills of the 'coach' are essential to the creation of the learning environment in both interventions. Considerable importance is also given to the relationships with other group members, in both team coaching and action learning processes.

2. Enabling learning and action

In both team coaching and action learning, the coach is primarily concerned with the creation of a supportive process for learning through questioning, reflection and taking action. Vaartjes (2005: 8) refers to the 'intentional action' as the action that is informed, designed and undertaken with a view to achieving a specific purpose or outcome. Grant (2001:29) highlights action orientation as one of the concepts underpinning a psychology of coaching. Whitworth *et al.*, (1998:79), propose that sustained changes arise from the "cycle of action and learning, over time" and action is central to the purpose of coaching because it is the mechanism, by which the client maintains their momentum towards desired outcomes. In action learning, real learning is not considered possible unless action is taken (Revans, 1982; Marquardt, 1999). The coach must intervene and accelerate the learning of participants by confronting, challenging, questioning and complimenting them (Dotlich and Noel, 1998). Questions are not intended to find answers, but rather to encourage deeper reflection and to raise awareness of implicit assumptions and surface tacit knowledge, by a conscious process of connection and meaning-making (Passfield, 1996; Dotlich and Noel, 1998; Marquardt 1999).

3. Building capacity for change

Vaartjes (2005) suggests that both coaching and action learning demonstrate a similarity in their underlying paradigm, in that both are underpinned by belief in the

human capacity for self-directed change. This implies that, in both team coaching and action learning, individuals have the innate capacity for change and that change can be facilitated through processes that support inquiry into their individual constructions and social interpretations, together with processes that support experience of alternative constructions. The coach is clearly accountable for effective application of process; however, accountability for the achievement of results belongs to the members of the action learning group, or the team members. In this way, individuals may be active in creating alternative, and preferred realities. The coach supports the achievement of change by enhancing the capacity for, and commitment to, purposeful action to achieve desired outcomes (Vaartjes, 2005).

Drawing on Vaartjes's (2005) work, Sanyal and Gray (forthcoming, 2018) also conclude that both interventions can enable personal and organisational development within a supportive relational environment. The authors also highlight some key differences in the two interventions, which offer clear distinctions.

1. Individual Verses Group or Team Issues

In action learning, individual members bring their issues or problems to the group process. Action learning seeks to make "meaning from experience" (Raelin, 1997: 26), with emphasis on surfacing the honest accounts of individual participants, relative to their current context to facilitate individual and social development (Marquardt, 1999). In team coaching, the group is the team and they work with each other on team issues. Individual issues may be brought to the surface through this process, but the ultimate focus is on resolving a collective issue faced by the team. O'Connor and Cavanagh (2016) suggest that team coaching occurs when it is focused internally, at a skills level, and is only interested in those internal dynamics of the team that are relevant to the team's goal attainment.

2. Inside-out Verses Outside-in

The theoretical framework of action learning is founded on the assumption that 'knowledge is socially constructed and created from within' (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002: 5), which is an 'inside-out' process facilitated by questioning insight and reflection on action (Passfield, 1996). In team coaching however, the coaching conversations may be intentionally pragmatic (Flaherty, 1999), effective in surfacing the right things at the right time, and may incorporate a feedback process (Crane, 1999; Dotlich and

Cairo, 1999). This is mainly initiated by the coach often using pre-defined model's and tools that generate information and, when well-administered, insight. Vaartjes (2005: 7) suggests that this is the 'outside-in' process which is actively facilitated by the coach. Thus, in action learning, individual issues are raised from within the action learning set and then addressed in the group. In contrast, in team coaching, the achieved or addressed outcomes may be pre-defined or outlined at the start of the intervention, although underlying issues may come to the surface later through the coaching process. Thus, team coaching 'is a reasoned and intentional intervention, into the ongoing events and dynamics of a group' (Reddy, 1994: 8) and the coach supports the group to achieve its agreed objectives.

3. Questioning Insight and Critical Reflection

The emphasis on questioning insight and critical reflection is a distinguishing feature of action learning. O'Neil and Marsick (2007) suggest action learning coaches engage teams at the process level and then seek to open minds to a deeper level of questioning. O'Neil (1999:128) also argue that, "It's different. As a process consultant you are floating with the process. You are helping people to stay in it and be aware of what is happening. As a learning coach you are on many more levels". In contrast, in team coaching, tools and models are often used to enable team analysis and address difficult team conversations, although experienced team coaches avoid over reliance on such tools). Thus, within team coaching, any focus on the team's internal conversation is only relevant to the extent that it is important for team goal attainment (O'Connor and Cavanagh, 2016). Therefore, the level and depth of reflections are limited to achieving its collective goal and may not develop further into an individual's perceptions.

When examining the role of a coach, in supporting reflection, learning and taking action in a team or a group, such as action learning, it is clear that there are similarities and differences in these interventions. An integrated model of coaching and action learning can draw on the strengths offered by the practices of both (Vaartjes, 2005; Sanyal and Gray, forthcoming, 2018). I will apply these core themes, underpinned by belief in the human capacity for self-directed change, during analyse of the role of the action learning facilitator. Action learning offers additional strengths in questioning insight and critical reflection and, as such, aspects are fundamental to experiential learning; therefore, next I will briefly explore the concepts of reflectivity and reflexivity to add to the rigour of my literature review.

2.9 Reflectivity and Reflexivity

The influence that reflection has on creating more effective learning has been widely discussed (Cowan, 1998; Brockbank and McGill, 1998), from consideration of the place of reflection in the learning process, as a step in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) and as a mechanism which specifically underpins the progression from surface to deep and to transformative learning (Barnett, 1997). Surface learning is by definition not reflective, in that no attempt has been made to examine the meaning of acquired facts and information, or to challenge received wisdom (Marton, 1975; Entwistle, 1996). On the other hand, deep learning is characterised by "a desire to get a grasp of the main point, make connections and draw conclusions" (Brockbank and McGill, 1998: 36), resulting in the more effective retention of learning and the ability to apply learning to new situations, enabling greater transfer of knowledge.

Moon (1999a:5) argues that reflection is "a means of transcending more usual patterns of thought to enable the taking of a critical stance or an overview" enabling such learning. She describes this as "a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution" (Moon, 1999a: 4). Reflectivity, thus, retains its reference as a process; the act of reflecting on practice (Malthouse *et al.*, 2014). Practitioners are encouraged to reflect on critical incidents in their practice and to develop an "ability to build...a generalised theory about [his/her] own behaviour in similar situations" (Fook, 1999: 197).

Differentiation is made (Schön, 1987; Morrison, 1996) between "reflection in action", a process which is immediate, short-term and concerned with adapting strategies or approaches, and "reflection on action", which takes place sometime after the event and is "an ordered, systematically structured, deliberate and deliberative, logical analysis of events and situations" (Morrison, 1996: 319). When the learner is prepared to abandon preconceptions, and re-examine their fundamental assumptions about, not only the subject matter, but themselves and the nature of knowledge, 'transformative learning' (Barnett, 1997) begins to take place.

Here, the distinction between reflection, as a common-sense review of experiences, in order to inform our future actions, and critical reflection, which challenges our pre-assumptions and perspectives (Mezirow, 1990) begins to emerge. The ability to be able to locate oneself within a structural picture, appreciating how one's self relates to others and organisation's is defined

as reflexivity (Fook, 2002; Fook and Gardner, 2007). Rennie (2009) defines reflexivity in terms of self-awareness and a gauge of personal agency within that self-awareness. Sometimes, reflectivity and reflexivity is used interchangeably (Pease and Fork, 1999), but there is considerable debate about whether they refer to the same notion (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000; Taylor and White, 2000).

In the context of my research, I view the nature of reflective practice as 'thinking with a purpose'; the cogitation and deliberation on particular issues as a means of sorting complex and ill-structured thoughts, perceptions and ideas (Moon, 2004). Reflexivity can occur at an individual level through questioning, reviewing, evaluating and from the willingness to examine assumptions and alternatives, leading to altering and assimilation of new perspectives (Hibbert, 2009; Hibbert *et al.*, 2010). As highlighted earlier in the AL literature, the 'coach' plays an important role in creating opportunities for learning from critical reflection (O'Neil, 1999; O'Neil and Marsick, 2007), as well as reflexivity through guiding AL members to learn, listen, identify and challenge assumptions, reframe issues and receive and give effective feedback (Bruner *et al.*, 1997). Thus, reflectivity and reflexivity are key considerations for me as a research practitioner within this research because I had to raise my own awareness to be able to reflect critically with reflexivity. For example, I did not just reflect on processes, but I also examined my assumptions, biases, personal values and beliefs and assimilated new perspectives. The understanding of these concepts has helped me to deepen my personal reflections and identify and further probe my thoughts, feelings and behaviours throughout the process of this doctoral work. I believe the practice of mindfulness, introduced within the Post Graduate Certificate programme as an AL process, has contributed to raising one's awareness, which is essential for effective reflection, particularly critical reflection. Therefore, next, I have reviewed the literature on mindfulness to understand the consequences of the mindfulness exercises used within the MHT action learning processes on the participants, specifically the facilitators and the impact on their facilitation role.

2.10 Mindfulness

Mindfulness is increasingly referred to in the organisation literature and has become popular in Western business and health sectors as a virtual cure for personal anxiety, stress and related illnesses, as well as offering promise for complex organisational decision-making. Mindfulness is defined as a state of 'heightened meta-awareness decreased discursive cognition' (Kudesia and Tashi Nyiman, 2015: 2). Systematic research reports positive impacts on brain activity,

producing increased control over chronic pain, anxiety and depression (Kerr *et al.*, 2013), limiting negative functioning and enhancing positive outcomes in mental health, physical health, behavioural regulation and interpersonal relationships (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Desbordes *et al.*, 2015). The practice of mindfulness aims to gain greater insight into the processes of the mind, in the sense of becoming more aware of one's own patterns of thought and dominant stories and preoccupations in the present moment, which can improve one's mental well-being.

The effects of mindfulness practice, particularly meditation, are well-documented. Physiological relaxation, improved concentration, heightened self-awareness, perceptual acuity, decreased anxiety and stress and empathy for others are the direct result of meditation. These changes affect emotional response, cognition and learning and therefore, potentially affect performance (Dumas, 2007). Studies have highlighted that the restful alertness achieved through mindfulness can lead to improved performance (Alexander *et al.*, 1987; Arguelles *et al.*, 2003). The ability to reason, speed of processing information and creative thinking are some areas of performance observed through studies on a group of students practising Transcendental Meditation¹ in Taiwan (Jevning *et al.*, 1992; So and Orme-Johnson, 2001). Brown and Rayan (2003) suggest that 'mindfulness' consists of putting aside personal filters to establish direct contact with experience and response to the experience in a more flexible way. Lakey *et al.*, (2008) agrees that mindfulness raises awareness and the unbiased processing of each moment as it occurs without making judgments.

Still, there does not appear to be any specific literature on the impact of mindfulness on coaches and certainly none on action learning facilitators. Can the ability to become more aware of one's own patterns of thought, process information effectively, response to the experience in a more flexible way, think creatively as well as develop reasoning, concentration and empathy (Alexander *et al.*, 1987; Arguelles *et al.*, 2003, Brown and Rayan, 2003; Lakey *et al.*, 2008; Baron, 2016) all support the facilitator within the action learning process? Also, has this helped to deal with ones' own, as well as other's emotions, differences and conflicts (if any)? Does it help with processes such as 'exchange', 'holding' and 'containing'?

In my research, I will explore these issues, focusing on whether the practice of mindfulness has enabled the AL facilitators to develop their capacity to observe themselves, interacting with

¹Transcendental meditation is a technique for detaching oneself from anxiety and promoting harmony and self-realization by meditation, repetition of a mantra, and other yogic practices

others ‘in the present’, and its overall impact on their AL facilitation. Finally, as my research focus is on the pedagogy of action learning, I have reviewed this concept to explore its meaning so that I can clearly define it in the context of my research.

2.11 Pedagogy – Meaning and Definition

The dictionary definition of pedagogy is the method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept. Wikipedia offers a similar meaning: Pedagogy is the discipline that deals with the theory and practice of education; it thus concerns the research of how best to teach. Literature illustrations suggest that the origins of the philosophy of education and critical pedagogy can be traced back to the time of Plato and Socrates. These two philosophers recognised the importance of dialogue for human interaction and for education. Later, Freire (1970) also advocated an education system based on dialogue and critical thinking, with a clear focus on the social or individual construction of knowledge, raised in the real life of the student.

However, research on education is underlined with debates on the aims, purposes and philosophy, relating to learning and pedagogy (McKenzie, 1977; Simon, 1981). This debate was fuelled when Knowles (1970) attempted to make the distinction between pedagogy and andragogy. Andragogy is defined as the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles 1970). But several authors preferred to view education as a single fundamental human process and argued that difference in adults and children did not justify a different educational approach (Houle, 1972; London, 1973; Elias, 1979). Later, Knowles (1979:52) conceptualised andragogy more as a technique rather than a theory; he quoted:

‘So, I am not saying that pedagogy is for children and andragogy is for adults, since some pedagogical assumptions are realistic for adults in some situations and some anagogical assumptions are realistic for children in some situations. And I am certainly not saying that pedagogy is bad and andragogy is good; each is appropriate given relevant assumptions”.

The continuation of this dialogue can be tracked in the literature, creating confusion and contention. More recently, a simple distinction between pedagogy and andragogy was made by Pew (2007). He suggests that in pedagogy, the educational focus is on transmitting, in a very teacher controlled environment, the subject or content matter. Furthermore, in andragogy, the

educational focus is on facilitating the acquisition of, and critical thinking about the content and its application in the real life practical setting. Smith and Smith (2008) suggest that pedagogy needs to be explored through the thinking and practice of those educators who look to accompany learners, care for and about them and bring learning to life. Educationalists, like Robin Alexander (2008), have argued that the importance of a curriculum in English schooling led to pedagogy simply as the process of teaching. The now outdated General Teaching Council for England (2010) took the view that teaching is a complex activity, which encompasses more than just ‘delivering’ education and described it as:

the art of teaching: the responsive, creative, intuitive part;

the craft of teaching: skills and practice;

the science of teaching: research-informed decision making and the theoretical underpinning.

Pedagogy is also seen as accompanying, caring for and bringing learning to life by those who working in social and youth work. This aspect of social pedagogy provides an added element to the significance of the person and their wellbeing. More recently, Tsabar (2017:46) has built on this in considering the nature of the relationship between educators and their students; he offers a pedagogy of mutual and non-alienated recognition, rooted in a dialogical relationship based on ‘care, responsibility, respect and knowledge’.

Thus, literature highlights that pedagogy is not only necessarily about the education or teaching of children, but it can be viewed more widely as the art, craft and science of creating an educational process that will develop a dialogical relationship between the educator and the learner, enabling learning and knowledge transfer. This relates well to the current interpretation of the practice of action learning, which can be an ethos, method or technique (Brook *et al.*, 2012). The emphasis on injecting more criticality into its practice (Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Pedler, 2005; O’Neil and Marsick, 2007; Lawless, 2008; Ram and Trehan, 2009) and the need to address and engage with the issue of emotion and politics in action learning (Vince, 2004, 2008), clearly suggests that the pedagogy of action learning will need to encompass, not just the science of teaching, but also the art and craft required to maximise learning and action of the participants. Thus, for my research, in trying to assimilate the data to develop a specific pedagogy for action learning facilitation, I will consider these aspects of ‘pedagogy’ within the principles and processes of AL facilitation.

2.12 Summary

In exploring the concepts of systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1968) and group dynamics (Foulkes, 1946; Lewin, 1947; Bales, 1970; McLeish *et al.*, 1973; Freud, 1975; Jaques 1984), I have been able to relate the processes of group experience to the context of action learning. The literature on group learning highlights the conditions which enable learning; here I have been able to relate the psychological aspects of ‘holding’, ‘containing’ and ‘exchange’ (Thornton 2016) to the context of action learning facilitation. In considering the experiential learning theory (Lewin, 1946; Kolb, 1984), the incorporation of emotions such as anxiety, fear, uncertainty, as well as ‘willing ignorance’, within the experimental learning cycle has emerged as significant, both in my practice and this research. Therefore, I consider the complexities of experiential learning, taking into account the notions of unconscious forces and aspects of power, at both individual and team level and group levels of learning (Cunningham, 1994; Vince, 1998). I will apply these essential aspects of learning and development in the group context of action learning in my research analysis.

The literature on facilitation, specifically the models of facilitation styles (Heron, 1977, 1999), stages of facilitation (Kiser, 1998), purpose (Hunter *et al.*, 1999) and the self-evaluation ‘frame’ of facilitation (Hogan, 2002) has helped me to make some aspects of the role of the facilitator more explicit. However, through the self-reflective critique in Chapter 1, I have realised that each practitioner’s ‘living frame’ will be informed by individual ontological and epistemological values. Thus, in considering these models and techniques of facilitation, I will deliberate the values that inform a facilitator’s practice.

It is evident, from both the generic literature on the practice of facilitation, as well as research on action learning, that in goal oriented groups a facilitation role is required for participants to reflect on, capture and apply their learning processes (Heron, 1999; Hogan, 2000, 2005; Marquardt, 2004; Marquardt and Banks, 2010; O’Neil and Marsick 2014). The literature has highlighted that action learning, as an intervention, offers individuals within a social learning context, the opportunity to maximise their potential through this developmental alliance and draws on concrete experience and critical reflection through dynamic dialogue on complex organizational issues (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). The AL process is underpinned by a belief in individual potential; a way of learning from what happens to us by taking the time to question, understand and reflect, to gain insights from actions and consider how to act in the future.

The action learning facilitator is referred to generally as a ‘practitioner’, and more specifically as a ‘coach’, ‘set advisor’ and ‘trusted inquisitor’ (Pedler, 1991; Marquardt, 2004; O’Neil and Marsick, 2007; Rimanoczy and Turner, 2008; Cho and Bong, 2010; Sofo *et al.*, 2010; Hoe, 2011; Gibson, 2011; Pedler and Abbott, 2013). In reviewing the roles, mind-sets and practices taken by action learning coaches, it emerges that action learning coaches seek to open minds to a deeper level of learning by supporting their abilities to identify and recognise patterns, recognize how the new situation differs and adjust or create new responses through questioning and reflection (Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Pedler, 2005; Lawless, 2008; Rimanoczy and Turner, 2008; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Ram and Trehan, 2009; O’Neil and Marsick, 2014). The conditions, processes and capabilities of an AL facilitator, that can enable participants to learn and take action in an organisational leadership development programme, will be discussed and analysed more fully in my research findings (Chapter 5).

Although there are considerable similarities between the role of the ‘coach’ in team coaching and action learning, it can be argued that AL coaches engage at the process level and then go beyond that level to a learning level (O’Neil, 1999). In particular, action learning offers strengths in questioning and reflection. Such practices are fundamental to learning and offer a rigour, structure and emphasis to enhance coaching and learning outcomes (Vaartjes, 2005); this will be a key focus of my research inquiry.

As emphasised by O’Neil and Marsick (2014), research specifically on the role of the action facilitator is still limited. My research attempts to address this gap by providing empirical evidence on the practice of the action learning facilitation, with insight into the cognitive and emotional aspects of facilitating goal oriented groups. Overall, I have drawn on the key constructs from this literature review to develop a conceptual framework covering the key areas of my research inquiry (Fig.2). I have used this framework to finalise the research questions I am most interested in exploring my research.

RQ1: What are the pedagogical practices of AL facilitators within their sessions?

RQ2: What do AL facilitators value most about themselves and their role as a facilitator?

RQ3: How do AL facilitators work with the AL members’ emotions? How does that impact on their own emotions?

RQ4: How do AL facilitators manage differences/conflicts and difficult situation during AL sessions?

I have referred to this framework throughout my research inquiry and returned to this conceptual framework to finalise the manual coding and thematic process, adding to the constructs during the analysis of the research data and an interpretation of the results to arrive at the findings which will then inform my outputs.

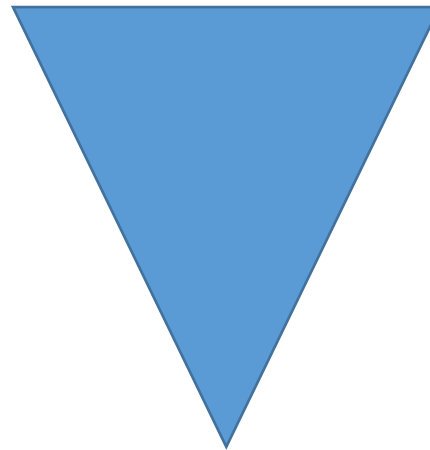
Action Learning Facilitation– a conceptual framework ©

Group dynamics

- Group assumptions (Bion, 1961)
 - Interaction theory (Bales, 1970; McLeish *et al.*, 1973; Jaques 1984)
- Condenser phenomena (Thornton, 2016) - *a shift through mindfulness*
- 'bounded instability' (Blackwell, 1998) – *locate a boundary using AL processes*

Group Learning

- Social learning (perception, behaviour, environment, non- symbolic, non-verbal, procedural awareness – Bandura, 1977; Stern, 2004).
- Difference in groups, exchange, holding, containing (Vince & Martin, 1993; Reynold & Trehan, 2003; Thornton, 2016).
- Experiential learning (transferring experience, 2nd order process of learning – Kolb, 1984; Gergen, 1992; Vince, 1998; Wierstra & De Jong, 2002; Coffield *et al.*, 2004).
- 'Conversational space' (Lewin, 1946; Kayes *et al.*, 2005).



Facilitation of learning

- Practice of facilitation - 'to have a conversation', 'to learn', 'to explore assumptions' or 'to achieve agreed goals' (Spencer 1989; Heron 1999; Hogan, 2000, 2005).
- Facilitation in AL- 'coach', 'advisor', blended AL facilitator (Revans, 1980; Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Vince, 2004; Pedler, 2005; O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Ram and Trehan 2009; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Pedler & Abbott, 2013; Thornton & Yoong, 2011).
 - Team coaching versus AL coaching.
 - *Being a mindful coach.*

Pedagogy of Action Learning facilitation

Figure 2: Action learning facilitation, a conceptual framework.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH CONTEXT

3.1 Introduction

To achieve the aim of my research I positioned it within a series of action learning sessions, which are part of a bespoke Middlesex University Business School post-graduate leadership development programme commissioned by an English NHS Mental Health Trust aimed at improving the leadership capacity of mid-level managers through work-based learning (Lester and Costley, 2010). This gave me the opportunity to work as a researcher in a live project which was part of my work practice as an action learning facilitator within the programme.

I explored the practice of action learning within the one-year post graduate programme (January 2016 to December 2016) for the purpose of my research. I have applied the programme delivery and evaluation tools such as the action learning sessions, the summative questionnaire and the focus group as well as planned research activities such as the group reflection gatherings and final participants' interviews which were specifically designed to achieved for the purpose of my research.

In this chapter, I present the context of the research study.

3.2 The Mental Health Trust Post Graduate Programme in Leadership and Management

The research focus was a series of AL sessions which are part of this programme delivery. The Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management is designed by Middlesex University Business School, in partnership with Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health Trust (BEH MHT), to meet the strategic and leadership development objectives of the Trust and, at the same time, to facilitate academic qualifications through learning in the work place. The aim of the programme is to improve the leadership capacity of mid-level managers. The participants were sponsored by the MHT and their application to enrol on the programme was supported by their line managers. They were mainly in management roles, either with direct line management responsibilities, or with supervision and project involvement requiring people management capabilities, working at a range of different operational levels including clinical and non-clinical services. The programme has been delivered annually since its launch in 2014.

The specific context of the research was within this third cohort of the programme, consisting of 15 participants, delivered between January 2016 and September 2016, followed by completion of assessed coursework in December 2016. It consists of six dedicated ‘study-days’ incorporating content on managing and leading people and teams and a series of four facilitated action learning sessions. The programme was delivered by a team of four academic/practitioner professionals. The assessment comprised of a reflective review of professional learning and a critical reflection of their personal leadership journey in the implementation of a ‘stretch-project’ within their workplace. An overview of the programme structure is shown in Figure 2. (Appendix 1).

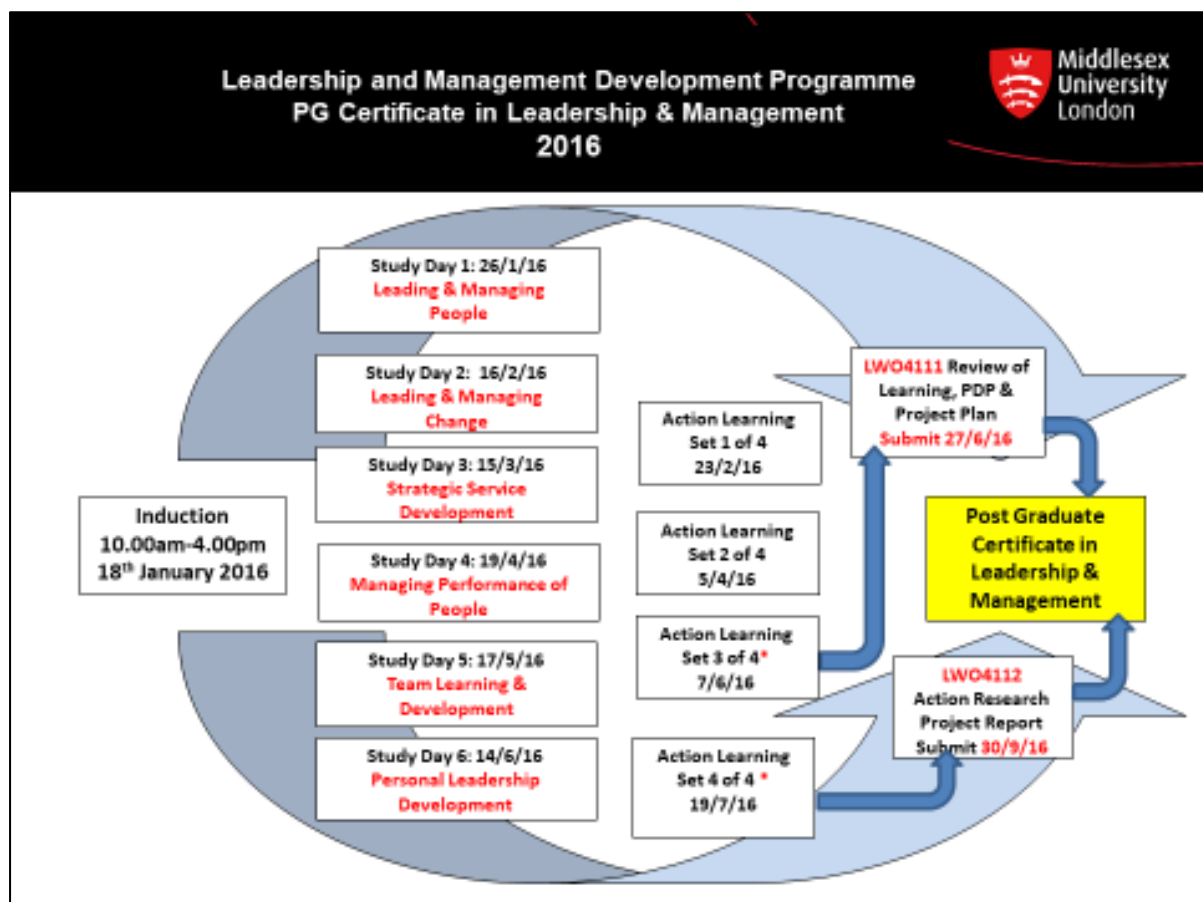


Figure 1: Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management Programme Overview

The programme has its own evaluation strategies such as evaluation questionnaires and focus group aimed at collating feedback for on-going improvement of the programme. I have incorporated these within my research methods to provide insight into participants' experience of AL facilitation. I wanted to focus on the AL sessions and involve participants and facilitators in my research. The Group Reflective Gathering process and semi-structured interviews with AL members and facilitators were designed as specific research methods to achieve this. I introduced art of 'being in the moment', as a technique within action learning sessions for the purpose of this research. The concept and practice of mindfulness was also threaded within the planned learning activities to embed mindfulness as a management development tool.

The first stage of the research project was to seek and secure consent for the research study from the MHT. I presented and discussed the aim and objectives of the research with the Head of Learning and Development at the trust. As the MHT was keen to enhance the evaluation of the impact of the programme and participate in the dissemination of the findings more widely through conferences, the organisation fully endorsed the research project. It was agreed that the proposed research would be presented to the programme participants during their induction on the 18th January 2016 and they would be given the opportunity to sign a formal consent form (as discussed in Chapter 4, section 4.9). Of the 15 participants, 14 signed the consent form on the day. The participant, who asked for more time to consider the proposal, returned with her signed form at the next workshop and confirmed her co-operation with the research project.

3.3 Action Learning Sets

The programme involved facilitation of action learning sets to provide a safe and confidential forum for participants to consider their current leadership and/or management issues and apply relevant leadership concepts, models and contexts addressed within the study days to gain deeper and new insights, to enable them to resolve real work problems (Dilworth and Willis 2003). The participants within this cohort formed three AL sets with five members in each set. I worked closely with the Head of Learning and Development at the MHT in the formation of these sets to ensure that the sets were a mixed group of clinical and non-clinical managers and that an AL member did not have his/her direct line manager in the same set. Four half-day sessions were scheduled between the study days to deepen the understanding of key concepts, develop skills of dialogue and reflect on practice to support peers as they addressed issues and increased their organisational knowledge and confidence through the network. This was not

specific to my research project but established practice within the Post Graduate Programme to maximise participants' learning experience.

However, for this research project, I designed and structured a simple process for each AL session, in consultation with two of the other AL facilitators and we used them as a guide/frame to facilitate each of our AL sets (**Appendix 27**). The sets were facilitated on the same day by three different AL facilitators; 2 sets met from 9.30am to 1pm at two different hospital settings within the MHT and one set was facilitated in the afternoon from 1.30pm to 5pm, also at a hospital setting. I was the AL facilitator for set 1 (**Appendix 2**). During the first AL session, members were given a handout on AL (this was already introduced in the induction) and key concepts were discussed again (**Appendix 7**). Overall, the three-and-half hour session was planned as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: AL session timetable.

Timings (approx.)	Activities /processes
9.30am to 10am/ 1.30pm to 2pm	AL process – explanation/ reminder and questions Checking- in
10am to 12.30pm/ 2pm to 4.30pm	Air space 30 minutes for each participant
12.30pm to 13:00pm / 4.30pm to 5pm	Checking out

The emphasis on the way of learning was from what was happening for the managers in their workplace by taking the time to question, understand and reflect, to gain insights from actions and consider how to act in the future. Figure 3 offers a simple model of AL and underpins its key aspects. This model was used to introduce AL to the AL members in the first session.



Figure 12: Model of Action Learning. (<http://www.cln.nhs.uk/aboutcln/action-learning.html>). After each action learning session.

3.4 Framing my research process within the research context

I aimed to improve my own practice and enable enhancement of practice of my co-facilitators through this research. I have therefore applied the established programme delivery and evaluation strategies and tools within the research project and also built in specific research activities such as the mindlessness practice within the programme, group reflective gatherings for co-inquiry and semi-structured interviews with AL members and facilitators to get deeper insight into the practice of AL facilitation.

This process was aided firstly by self-reflection to improve my own practice through scanning my ‘inner arc of attention’ (Marshall, 2001; 2016) by raising my awareness of how I frame and interpret my own AL practice; and secondly, by engaging with my co-researchers to create a community of inquiry and mutual exploration through engaging in an ‘outer arc of attention’ (Marshall, 2001; 2016) leading to enhanced practice and change. Figure 4 represents the cycles of my research. The AL sessions and the participants feedback are established programme activities. The process of self-reflective inquiry and group reflections are additions research cycles: the self-reflective has enabled me to build a personal framework for development and

change which is the core of a professional practice doctoral programme. The group reflective gathering (comprising four members) after each AL session enabled co-inquiry and co-creation through shared experiences and review of practice. This is a ‘real-world’, ‘living’ research project and was part of my work practice as an AL facilitator within the programme.

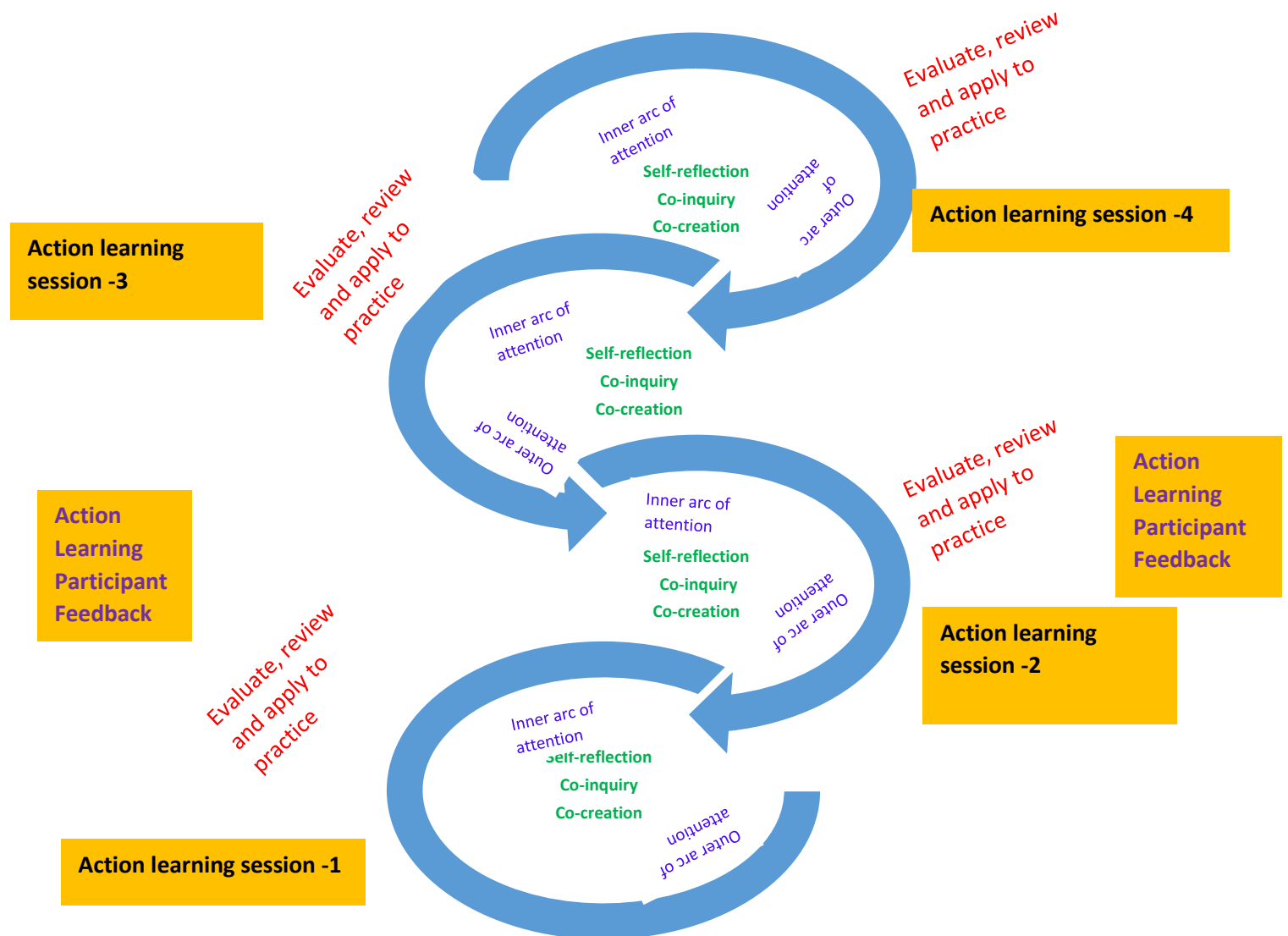


Figure 4: My research cycle (adapted from Coghlan and Brannick 2010; Marshall, 2001; 2016).

3.5 Summary

It was crucial for me to create a research project that was congruent with my experience as a facilitator of learning and my understanding of the action learning process. Therefore, I wanted to ensure that it was practice-based, as well as collaborative, so that my co-action learning facilitators and I could deepen our insight and awareness of our practice as AL facilitators. The participants' experience of the facilitation was also a key element to understanding the conditions, processes and capabilities required to be an effective facilitator.

The research context has given me the opportunity to focus on the practice of AL learning 'to reflect and act fluidly in context and to maintain curiosity about what is happening' (Marshall, 2011: 175). In the next chapter, I have presented further details of the research activities and relate these to the research methods to demonstrate how I have captured and analysed what was happening within the AL sets through my own and the group reflections, programme evaluations and participant interviews, by weaving together my inner and outer 'arcs of attention' (Marshall, 2001; Marshall, 2016), framing and making sense of my 'inner' reflections, as well paying attention to the 'outer' patterns of thought, feedback, insight and experience of others involved in this research.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

‘Good qualitative methodologists conduct research the way they conduct themselves in their personal lives’ (Ellis, 2007, cited in Tracy, 2010, p16).

The purpose of this chapter is to share what has informed and grounded the research approach and methodology of my doctoral study. In this research, I have explored the practice of the action learning facilitator/practitioner through a process of critical inquiry, self-reflection and evaluation of the practice of action learning within the Mental Health Trust Post Graduate Programme (**Appendix 1**).

My aim was to capture the conditions, processes and capabilities that a facilitator can develop to enable participants to learn and take action within a workplace context. Prior to commencing this study, I have had nearly 20 years of experience as a facilitator of learning in various human resource development practitioner roles and more specifically, two years’ experience in facilitating Action Learning within a Leadership and Management Programme, which is the context of my study (Chapter 1.8). As I reflected on my own practice, shared experiences and learning with my co-facilitators, I developed a keen interest in understanding this practice of facilitation in greater depth. I now see myself as a *‘practitioner-researcher’*, as well as an *‘insider researcher’* (Anderson, 2004; Barber, 2009). The main purpose of my research was to explore and improve my own practice, through my own lived experience (Whitehead, 1989), by taking an attitude of inquiry (Marshall and Reason, 2007), as well as applying a process of ‘co-operative inquiry’ (Heron and Reason, 2008) and mutual exploration (Marshall, 2016) with my co-action learning facilitators, as a way to understanding research and practice with others who have similar interests. This enabled me to weave between my ‘inner and outer arcs of attention’ (Marshall, 2001; 2016), as I sought to reflect on what was happening within the AL sets and the role of the facilitator within this process.

In considering the research philosophy or paradigm to inform and provide a strategy for my research, I was guided by my personal values and beliefs (as a result of formative years and lived experience), which are strongly informed by humanistic psychology (e.g., Rogers, 1957; Rowan, 1988; Maslow, 1998); we learn in a social context, experience forms the basis of

determining wisdom and knowledge (Barber, 2009) and relationships are at the core of human capabilities and sensibilities (Reason, 1988; Heron, 1996). With these factors in mind, and supported by the alignment of my values, my practitioner experience and the rationale for this study, I present here, the relevant aspects of my research methodology.

3.2 Research Paradigm and Philosophy

The significance of a research paradigm to the researcher, is to help him or her to seek the best apparatus with which to gather the data for the purpose of the research. This is often achieved through evaluating alternative approaches on the basis of fit for purpose. Rossman and Rallis (1989) define a research paradigm as “shared understanding of reality”, which is a set of assumptions about how things work in the context of the world view. According to Taylor *et al.*, (2007:5) a paradigm is “a broad view or perspective of something”. Additionally, Weaver and Olson’s (2006:460) definition of paradigm reveals how research could be affected and guided by a certain paradigm, “paradigms are patterns of beliefs and practices that regulate inquiry within a discipline by providing lenses, frames and processes through which investigation is accomplished”.

Research philosophy can be defined as the development of the research background, research knowledge and its nature (Lewis *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, research philosophy may help to define or influence research paradigm. According to Gliner *et al.*, (2001:17) a “paradigm is a way of thinking about and conducting a research”. It is not strictly a methodology, but more of a philosophy that guides how the research is to be conducted”. I applied these concepts of research paradigm and research philosophy, synonymously, to develop my overall structure of inquiry and methodological choices.

Proctor (1998) states that comprehension and exploration of the two extremes of research philosophy, e.g. positivism and post-positivism, need to be ascertained before any significant decision on a research method can be made. As the positivist thinking takes the traditional scientific approach, which is a study of hard facts to establish the relationship between these facts in accordance to scientific laws (Smith 1998), it is not aligned to my research perspectives. My research, which involved a process of self, as well as co-inquiry into the lived practice of

AL facilitation, relates to constructing meaning through this interaction (Gray, 2014). As much of the data was gathered through reflective practice and insights into individual experiences, pragmatism and realism were not considered as theoretical perspectives. Rather, as a practitioner researcher, I was guided by my underpinning research principle that humans actively construct their own meaning and create new knowledge (Rand, 2013). Thus, epistemologically, it seemed entirely congruent to apply a constructivist research philosophy to develop meaning using interpretivism as the theoretical perspective. This has enabled me to focus on the actions and experiences of individuals which are unique in the social world (Crotty, 1998) and therefore require a different logic of research procedure to that applied to study the natural sciences (Bryman, 2012); This guided my research design.

3.3 Research Design

The terms ‘research design’, ‘research approach’ and ‘research strategy’ are used in a variety of ways by different authors. Anderson (2004: 59) defines research design as “the framework that you devise to guide the collection and analysis of your data” and research strategy as “the general approach that you take in your research inquiry”. What guides the choice of a research strategy depends on factors such as the research context, existing knowledge about the research area, the time available for the completion of the study, amount of resources available and the nature of the questions that the researcher aims to answer (Kumar, 2005). According to Lewis *et al.*, (2007) a research approach is described as a master plan, detailing the adopted design and techniques which the researcher intends to employ, to provide guidance through his or her research process.

In establishing the scope and boundary within which I conducted my research, and collected and analysed my data, I considered the research approaches highlighted in the literature: deductive, inductive and abductive. While the deductive approach leans very much towards the scientific direction, the inductive approach tends to lean towards the social perspective, for example, exploring the meanings that humans attach to events (Lewis *et al.*, 2007). The abductive approach can be seen as having a logical inference (and thereby reasonable and scientific), and, at the same time, it extends into the realm of profound insight (and therefore generates new knowledge) (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). As this research was an inquiry into current practice, which aims to produce a systematic body of evidence-based knowledge, the

inductive approach would support this process. I therefore have adopted the inductive research process to collect and analyse data and see if any patterns and consistencies emerge through which it may be possible to construct generalisations, relationships and even theories (Gray, 2013).

In this research undertaking, I drew on a combination of research strategies that could contribute to addressing the issues under investigation, aiming to build an evidence-base to first, improve my own practice; second, to share this practice and knowledge with my co-researchers, e.g. other action learning practitioners at Middlesex University; and third, to the wider human resource development practitioner and academic community. Thus, my overarching research approach would be a collaborative inquiry *with and for people rather than on them* (Reason, 1988; Heron, 1996), which would involve cycles of review, development and improvement. As a result, I identified action research (Heron and Reason, 2008; Marshall, 2011) as the most appropriate research framework for my inquiry.

3.4 Action Research: My Research Approach

According to Gelling and Munn-Giddings (2011), action research is a unique and often complex approach to research. It has been used in education and community development studies for a long time and has now become popular in other disciplines such as health, social care and business studies. This makes it challenging to get an agreed definition of action research. The term ‘action research’ was first used by Kurt Lewin (1946); he observed that effective organisational research should be seen as an open-ended and continuous process of planning, acting, observing and reflection. More recently, Coghlan and Brannick (2010) observe that action research is a generic term that covers many forms of action-oriented research. This indicates diversity in theory and practice amongst action researchers and provides a wider choice for potential action researchers as to what might be appropriate for their research.

This broad scope and intent of action research has been clearly communicated in some definitions. Reason (1994) describes it as a co-operative inquiry, where all those involved in the research are both co-researchers, whose thinking and decision making contribute to the generation of ideas, designing and managing the project and drawing conclusions from the

experience, and co-subjects who participate in the activity being researched. Reason and Bradbury (2008: 1) offer another definition of action research; in their words, “action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory world view”. In the context of health and social care, Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001: 8) describe it as “the study of a social situation carried out by those involved in that situation in order to improve both their practice and the quality of their understanding”. Another definition, focusing on organisational change by Shani and Pasmore (1985:439 cited in Coghlan and Brannick, 2010) explains that “action research may be defined as an emergent inquiry process, in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing organisational knowledge and applied to solve real organisational problems...it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry”. This practice of co-operative inquiry, as a way of understanding research with others who have similar interests, has been highlighted by Heron and Reason (2008). On the other hand, Carr and Kemmis (1986) describe it simply as a form of self-reflective inquiry, undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve their own practices, understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out.

A review of these definitions highlights some key features of action research. First, action research can be a participatory research process involving all participants (Reason, 1994; Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001:8; Reason and Bradbury, 2008:1). Marshall (2011) refers to this as the ‘third person action research’ aiming to stimulate a broader sensibility of inquiry amongst participants. Coghlan and Brannick (2010: 6) interprets this more broadly to define third person inquiry/practice as creating communities of inquiry, which is ‘impersonal and is actualised through dissemination by reporting, publishing and extrapolating from the concrete to the general’.

The semi-participatory action research, articulated as the ‘second person action research’ by Marshall (2011), involves people coming together to inquire into issues of mutual interests in a process of co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2008). Marshall’s (2011) ‘first person action research’ relates to the self-reflective inquiry (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Whitehead, 1989). Therefore, overall action research is participatory because even at the individual level the process of review-diagnosis-planning-implementation-monitoring provides the link between self-evaluation and professional development (Elliott, 1991). Another key feature is

that the research is action, not description oriented. Action research aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about the action. Third, the purpose of action research is to work towards practice change during the research process. Therefore, the outcomes are both an action and a research outcome, unlike traditional research approaches which aim only to create knowledge. This aligns fully with the aim and purpose of my research because my research involves an unfolding series of actions over time in my own area of work, in my own place of employment. It would also involve going through a process of taking action, analysing, reviewing, learning from the action and then taking further action (Anderson, 2004). Furthermore, contemporary action research assumes that ordinary members can generate valid knowledge as partners in a systematic empirical inquiry based on their own framework of understanding (Elden and Chisholm, 1993). Again, with my prior experience of facilitation of goal-oriented groups, and in particular, the last two years' experience in facilitation of action learning in a leadership development programme, has enhanced my understanding of facilitation in this context and built a set of skills which has given me the confidence to engage in this live inquiry of practice as an 'action researcher' (Anderson, 2004; Barber, 2009).

I adopted Marshall's (2011) first person and second person action research approach in my research. In undertaking the first person action research, through a self-reflective inquiry (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Whitehead 1989), I have applied 'living theory' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) to undertake a critical inquiry of my own AL practice for my own professional development (Elliott 1991). I have also engaged in the second person action research through the co-operative inquiry (Shani and Pasmore, 1985; Heron and Reason, 2008) with my co-facilitators to address development and change in the practice of AL facilitation. The third person inquiry in my research relates to Coghlan and Brannick's (2010: 6) broader definition of third person action research which encompasses 'creating communities of inquiry, involving people beyond direct second-person action...and dissemination by reporting, publishing and extrapolating from concrete to the general'. I have involved the AL members as research participants (as respondents of the focus group, questionnaire and interviews) as part of the AL community within Cohort 3 of the post graduate programme. As the key findings of the research will be shared within the MHT as well as more widely, they will have the opportunity to be a part of this dissemination. I planned that the AL co-facilitators would be more directly involved in researching 'with me' as the focus of my research was on the role of the facilitator. However, the AL participants, as recipients of the facilitation, would also be engaged in the inquiry through feedback and evaluation processes which would be built into the programme,

which I anticipated would help to understand the impact of practice of facilitation. Marshall (2011) also states that writing is third-person inquiry, if it seeks to generate debate. In disseminating my research findings within the human resource development practitioner and academic community, I would aim to engage in, as well as stimulate debates on the role of AL facilitation and make suggestions for further research.

Thus, my action research process involved a “spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin 1946/1947:146). According to Lewin (1946/1947) there is no action without research and no research without action. Thus, my aspects of action research are two-fold:

- 1) The ‘action’ of the action research refers to the what I do, i.e. *the actions I take as part of this study*.
- 2) The ‘research’ of the action research refers to *how I find out about what I do*.

This has required a methodical, iterative approach embracing problem identification, action planning, implementation, evaluation and reflection. The insights gained from the initial cycle feed into planning of the second cycle, for which the action plan is modified and the research process repeated. According to Argyris (2003) this inquiry into steps of the cycles themselves is central to the development of actionable knowledge. It is the dynamics of this reflection, on reflection, that incorporates the learning process of the action research cycle and this learning is defined as ‘meta-learning’ by Coghlan and Brannick (2010). Hence, according to Coghlan and Brannick (2010), action researchers “engage in constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action, while inquiring and seeking insight and understanding into the enactment of the cycles, judging what is appropriate and then taking action on the basis of your judgement”, as represented in Figure 14.

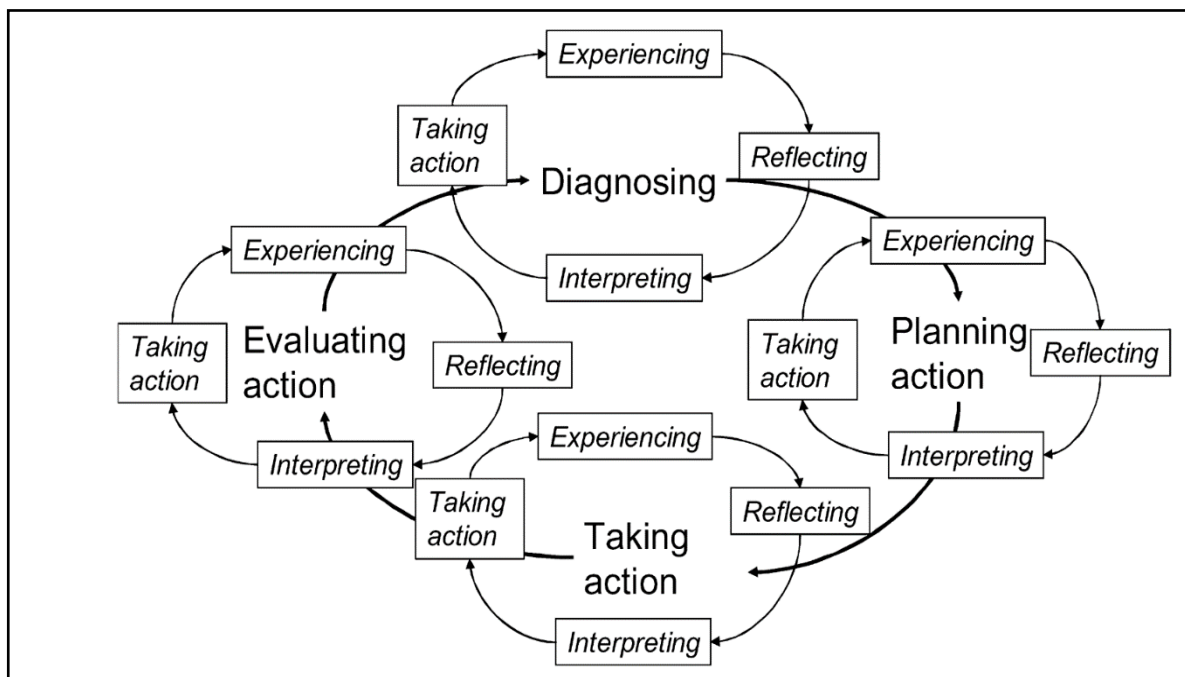


Figure 14: The empirical method of action research projects (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010).

The focus of this methodology is the awareness of one's own practice and making the processes of learning public with others and explaining how this informs their practice. Therefore, as McNiff (2013) suggests, it is also about the relationship between the researcher and their knowledge, and with others in the research who are also creating knowledge and with whom they make up a knowledge creating community. This will involve embedding new practices, which are research-informed and evidence-based.

In the context of my research study, this action research process of engagement, through collaborative discussion and dialogue, I believed, would lead to more informed practice. The key aim, as suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2006), is to enable practitioners to learn how they can improve practice, individually and collectively. Therefore, as highlighted by McNiff (2013: 8), “this is not an ego-centred, research-centred focus on the ‘I’, but a collaborative action research with not just the emphasis on ‘we’; it is the ‘I’ in dialogical relation with others and others in dialogical relation with me and others”. Bargal (2008) confirms this through his own action research experience, as he concludes that action research combines theory and practice in an effective way; it is about a different model of relations between actors and parties who participate in it which is humanistic and empowers its participants.

Through the process of research and action, I aimed to improve my own practice and enable enhancement of practice of my co-facilitators. Thus, for me, action research is “an enquiry by the self into the self, with others acting as co-researchers and critical learning partners”. (McNiff, 2013:23). My action research approach involved cycles of planning and action followed by evaluation and review, which would inform the next cycle and so on. This process was aided; first, by self-reflection to improve my own practice through scanning my ‘inner arc of attention’ (Marshall, 2001; 2016) by raising my awareness of how I frame and interpret my own AL practice; and second, by engaging with my co-researchers to create a community of inquiry and mutual exploration through engaging in an ‘outer arc of attention’ (Marshall, 2001; 2016) leading to enhanced practice and change. Figure 15 represents the action research

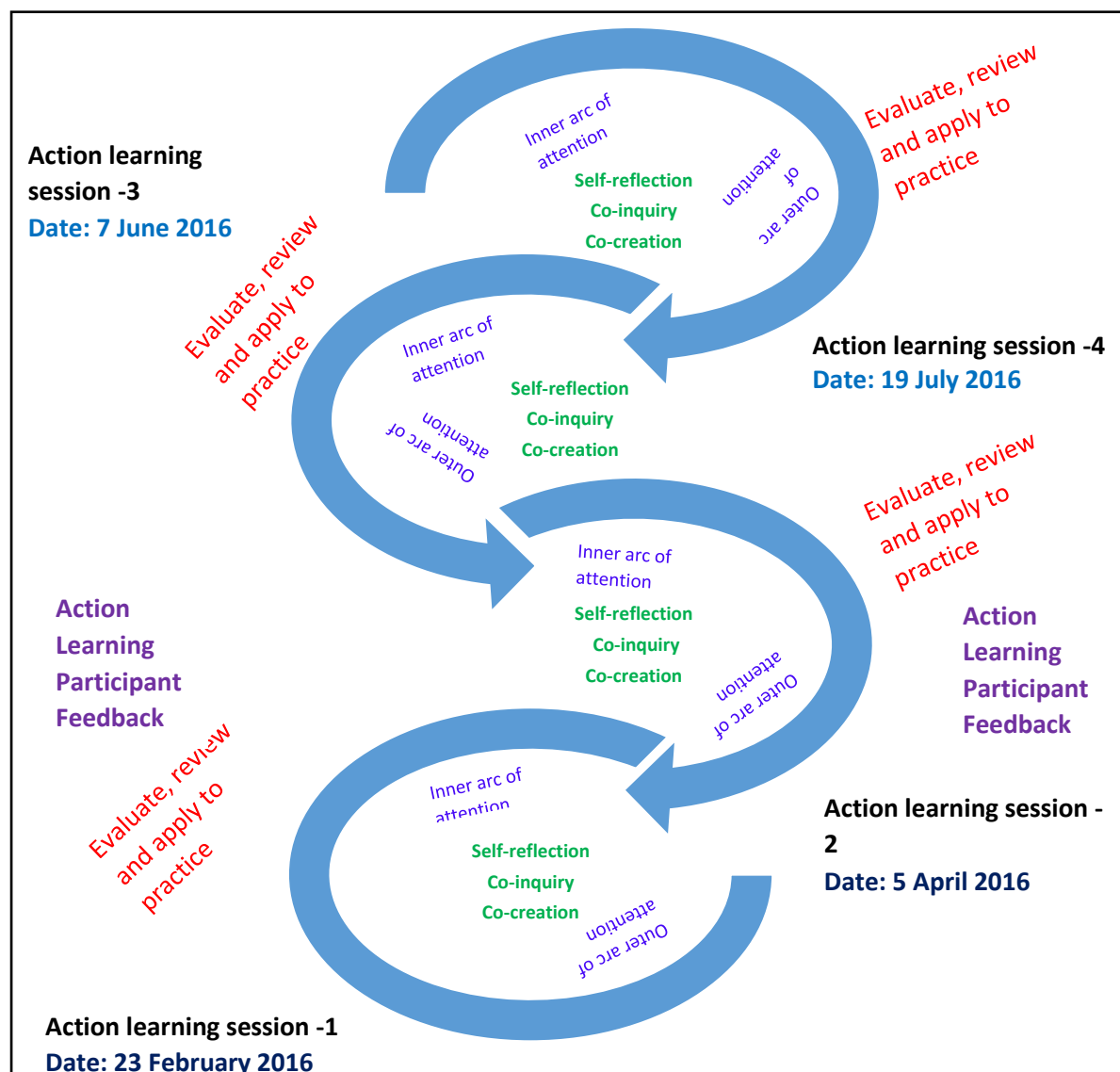


Figure 15: My action research cycle (adapted from Coghlan and Brannick 2010; Marshall, 2001; 2016).

process within my study which is adapted from Coghlan and Brannick's (2010) concept of meta-learning, through a process of constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action, as well as Marshall's (2001, 2016) notion for weaving between 'inner and outer arcs of attention'

This process of reflective inquiry, after each of the four Action Learning sessions, involved a self-reflective analysis, individually after each session, as well as collectively through co-inquiry and reflection (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006) with other action learning facilitators after each Action Learning session. I used thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) in the data collected through this process. My rationale for this choice and the process of data analysis is presented in section 3.7. In this section, I will explore how I organised my data which led to the rich picture that emerged on the role of the AL facilitator using a mixed-method approach (Yin, 2006; Bekhet and Zauszniewsk, 2012). In the next section, I have set out the research methods applied to collect my data.

3.5 Research Methods: Methods Selected for Data Gathering

There are a number of different ways of collecting data, which can be used for making meaningful conclusions. I applied a range of data gathering methods in this research. Anderson (2004) provides a simple overview of the different methods of data gathering. The different methods can either be structured, semi-structured or unstructured and it is also possible to see the level of involvement the researcher has within the process. I have used Anderson's (2004) model as a guide to identify my data collection methods. As an 'insider researcher' I had to be aware of this at all times of the level and depth of my involvement in the research situation during collection and analysis. My primary research methods are:

1. **Diary narratives:** I maintained a record of personal reflections after the facilitation of each of the four action learning sessions.
2. **Group reflections:** Following each of the four action learning sessions, the participating action learning facilitators, including me, met in 'group reflective gatherings' to review our experiences of the practice of AL facilitation.

3. **General and participant observations:** This was addressed in my personal narratives and raised during the group reflections. Anderson (2004) identifies ‘conversation’ as an unstructured technique, which I consider very similar to the reflective gathering/ group conversation conducted within this study.
4. **Questionnaire, focus group and semi-structured interviews:** The participants of the action learning sessions completed summative questionnaires and participated in focus groups as a part of the overall evaluation of the leadership programme and were specifically designed to capture their learning from and experience of the action learning process. The interview questions were designed in line with my research questions.

The data gathering methods (in green in Fig. 16) show how I adapted Anderson’s (2004) research methods to the context of my study. For example, according to Anderson (2004), the researcher may be detached from the situation during observation and recording diaries/narratives but in the context of my study these methods were unstructured and I was fully involved in the research situation.

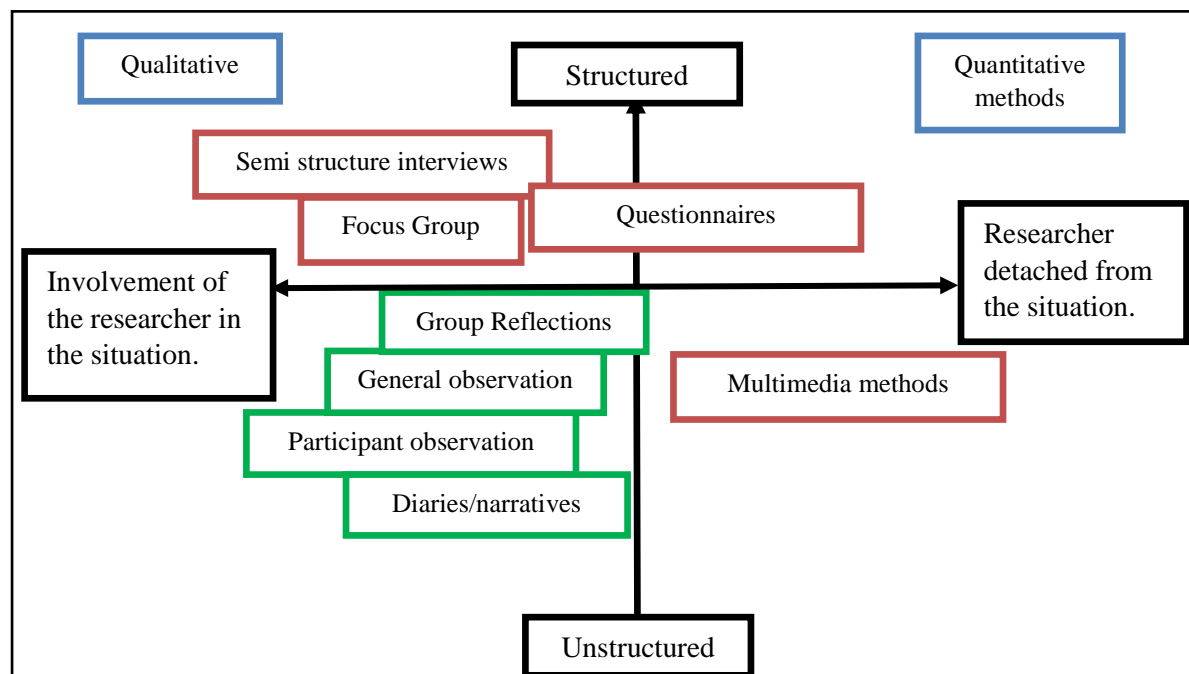


Figure 16: Data gathering methods (adapted from Anderson, 2004).

3.5.1 Diary Narratives and Group Reflections

Diaries are similar to field notes, but are naturally structured by date and can be in a written format or oral (audio recorded). Documents in written format may include words but also photographs or diagrams. Hall (2008) points out that there is no standard format for diaries. I used them to make notes of my own observations, including participant observations after each action learning facilitation session. I applied a self-reflective methodological process (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006), as well as taking an attitude of inquiry through first person action research (Marshall and Reason, 2007). I sought to examine my ‘inner arc of attention’ (Marshall, 2001; 2016) to make sense of my practice through the reflective notes. At the same time, I drew on Whitehead and McNiff’s (2006) concept of the living theory approach as a discipline for critical inquiry and self-reflection of my AL facilitation practice. ‘Living theory’ (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) engages in systematic enquiries, focuses on improving practice and generates knowledge by asking the question, ‘*How do I improve what I am doing?*’. This interpretative approach provided me with an appropriate framework to enquire into my own practice and has enabled me to take an inquiring attitude to be reflexive, by questioning my practice in relation to my personal values and beliefs, as well as my past experiences.

I also applied a process of ‘co-operative inquiry’ (Heron and Reason 2008) through a group reflective process with two other co-action learning facilitators. The reflective group conversations were recorded and transcribed. This enabled me to incorporate ‘the outer arc of attention’ (Marshall, 2001; 2016) to add further rigour to the ‘live inquiry’ and gave me an opportunity to gain further insight into the practice of action learning facilitation with my colleagues who have similar interests. My application of living theory is discussed further in Section 3.9.

3.5.2 Interviews, Questionnaires and Focus Groups

These are valuable ways of capturing live responses of people. A post-evaluation questionnaire was used to collate participants’ feedback on their experience of action learning. As I had designed and applied this questionnaire for the last two cohorts of the programme, it had already been piloted and tested on two occasions. In reviewing these for Cohort 3, I added a series of self-assessment questionnaires on ‘personal impact’ specifically aimed at assessing

impact of the mindfulness exercises within the programme on participants' resilience and self-care. At the end of the programme, semi-structured interviews were conducted to get in-depth insights of action learning experience from the members. Of the 15 participants, 14 participated in the interviews. The action learning members in my set were interviewed by a colleague within the programme (but not involved in action learning facilitation) and I undertook the interviews for members within the other two action learning sets. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and were conducted between December 2016 and February 2017, which was recorded (with consent from the participant) and transcribed.

A focus group was held using mainly 'appreciative inquiry' and 'dialogue', as tools to maximise participation and engagement. 'Appreciative inquiry' was used to apply a 'positive lens' to create a new kind of conversation amongst participants, focusing on positive experiences to understand 'the best of what is in order to identify what could be' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). Again, through the process of 'dialogue', conversational activities were used to draw attention to certain crucially important features that would otherwise escape our notice (Shotter, 1993). Of the 15 participants, 11 participated in a focus group which was conducted on the 7th September 2016, lasting for approximately two hours. Participants' contributions were captured in a form (e.g. on post-it notes); these were then clustered into underpinning themes with agreement and validation of the participants.

3.5.3 Visual and Multimedia Methods

I also conducted desk-top research of websites and presentations on YouTube, on the facilitation of learning in goal oriented groups, to understand current trends and practices on the topic of my study. This range of research methods facilitated a degree of methodological triangulation (Bryman and Bell, 2007) and enabled me to generate and collate significant qualitative data to address the key objectives of my research study. The application of different data-collection methods within the same study has enabled me to check whether the interpretation of the evidence makes sense, in the light of other evidence gathered in a different way (Anderson, 2004). This use of multiple methods to shed light from different perspectives on this study has increased my confidence and enhanced the credibility of my research findings.

3.6 Living Theory

As mentioned above, I applied the ‘living theory’ (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) approach to action research to undertake a critical enquiry and self-reflection of my AL facilitation practice. This form of self-reflective inquiry, to improve one’s own practice (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), also aligns to my ‘first person action research’ (Marshall, 2011) approach. This process enabled me to gather empirical evidence of the practice of AL facilitation and the role of the facilitator within it. Through this method, explanations of my own learning, generated by me and from the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formation in which I work and practice, enabled me to build on my own ‘living theories’ of AL facilitation (Whitehead, 1989; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). This concept of “theory and practice, as integrated, and as a generative transformational cycle that has the potential for infinite self-renewal” (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006: 155), enabled me as a practitioner action researcher to gather the kind of data that could help me examine and improve my practice and share my learning with others (Sanyal, 2017).

Therefore, I used a self-reflective, ‘first-person action research’ methodological approach for this qualitative study to draw on the concept of ‘living theory’, which focuses on the importance of *praxis* in which “...practitioners investigate their own practice through [self] observation, describing and explaining what they are doing in company with one another and producing their own explanations for what they are doing and why” (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006:68). I gathered the data and generated evidence to support my claims and then tested these knowledge claims for their validity, through the critical feedback of others, which align to my ‘second person action research’ (Marshall, 2011) approach to my research.

Thus, to build my ‘living theory’ on AL facilitation, I investigated my practice of AL facilitation through; *first*, a self-reflexive process drawing on data from my personal narratives (using reflective diary entries); *second*, describing, explaining and examining observations from my practice with other AL facilitators, my ‘critical friends’ (using digital voice recordings of four reflective gatherings); and *third*, analysing AL participants’ feedback (using focused group feedback and questionnaire). To ensure robustness of my research, I adapted and applied a set of questions based on Whitehead and McNiff’s (2006) living theory approach for my own enquiry.

My 'living theory' enquiry questions were:

- What is my concern?
- What will I do about it?
- What kind of evidence do I produce to show that what I am doing is having an influence?
- How do I ensure that any judgements I make are reasonably fair and accurate?
- How do I modify my practice in the light of my enquiry?

This process of personal and social validation then enabled me to test the evidence I had gathered for my AL practice and draw conclusions from within my own practice (Sanyal, 2017). Through this self-reflexive enquiry, I developed my 'living theories' of the role of AL facilitation.

3.7 Data Analyses

The central requirement in qualitative analysis is clear thinking on the part of the researcher. Fetterman (1998) considers that the analysis is as much a test of the researcher as it is a test of the data: 'first and foremost, qualitative analysis is a test of the ability to think: to process information in a meaningful and useful manner (Fetterman, 1998, p. 93). Robson and McCartan (2016) suggest that there are diverse approaches to analysing qualitative data. Miles *et al.*, (2014: 10) offer a 'fairly classic set of analytic moves' such as coding, labelling, themes, adding comments and reflections, referred to as 'memos', to discern consistencies within the data and link these generalisations to a formalised body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories. However, there is an inescapable emphasis on *interpretation*, in dealing with qualitative, which precludes reducing the task to a defined formula or imposing a frame on what is happening, rather than this occurring or emerging during the research (Robson and McCartan, 2016).

A review of the literature highlights that a number of interpretative frames can be applied for qualitative analysis, such as quasi-statistical approaches, thematic coding analysis, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, grounded theory approach and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Burman and Parker, 1993; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999; Smith and Osborn 2008; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012;

Robson and McCartan, 2016). In considering an appropriate ‘framework’ for the analysis of my research, my main deliberation was how I would demonstrate the validity of my interpretations. Mason (1996) argues that validity of interpretation, in any form of qualitative research, is dependent on the ‘end product’, including a demonstration of how that interpretation was reached. He explains this as follows:

“This means that you should be able to, and be prepared to, trace the route by which you came to your interpretation. The basic principle here is that you are never taking it as self-evident that a particular interpretation can be made of your data, but instead that you are continually and assiduously charting and justifying the steps through which your interpretations were made” (Mason, 1996, p. 150).

This guiding principle steered my choice of an organising frame to interpret my research data. I used thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The advantage of using this analysis is the flexibility it offers to minimally organise and describe a qualitative data set in rich detail (Robson and McCartan, 2016). It also allows the researcher to use a variety of information in a systematic way so it becomes beneficial in producing data from different sources (Boyatzis, 1998). This further justified my rationale as I applied a range of data collecting methods in my research.

Thematic analysis, as a method of qualitative analysis, differs from other analytical methods that seek to describe patterns across qualitative data such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith *et al.*, 1999; Smith and Osborn 2008; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which I considered to analyse and interpret my data. Both IPA and grounded theory also seek patterns in data but are theoretically bound. IPA is attached to a phenomenological epistemology (Smith *et al.*, 1999; Smith and Osborn, 2003). In contrast, grounded theory, which comes in different versions (Charmaz, 2002), aims to generate a plausible theory of the phenomena that is grounded in the data (McLeod, 2001). Thematic analysis, on the other hand offers flexibility. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that thematic analysis can be used as a realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and realities of participants, or as a constructionist method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings and experiences are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. This is congruent to my underpinning research principles, as discussed in section 3.1.

I chose thematic analysis to develop and build upon my own organising frame to reflect reality and also to unpick the surface of ‘reality’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the pedagogy of AL facilitation. In establishing what counts as a ‘theme’, I ensured that the theme captured something important about the data in relation to my research question and that it represented some level of patterned responses or meaning within the data set. The ‘keyness’ or importance of a theme will not necessarily be dependent on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

My analytical process involved progression from description; where data has been organised to show patterns; to summarising and interpretation; and finally to theorise the significance of the patterns and their boarder meaning and implications (Patton, 1990; Braun and Clarke, 2006). I applied a 5-step process to demonstrate how the interpretations were reached.

Step 1 - Getting familiar with the data and generating initial codes.

Step 2 - Collating codes by a process of arranging and rearranging into potential themes using the conceptual frame (Fig. 13).

Step 3 - Defining and naming themes.

Step 4 - Building a theoretical framework (*What, How, Why*).

Step 5 - Developing a model of pedagogy of AL facilitation (apply *What, How, Why* to the purpose of AL facilitation).

I applied the ‘flexibility’ in thematic analysis to construct a step-by-step organising frame to provide a counter claim that in thematic analysis there may be little or no information about the details of the process. Also, Robson and McCartan (2016) suggest that the results of the thematic analysis can be communicated without any major difficulty to practitioners, policy makers and the educated general public. This supports my plan to disseminate my research findings more widely and particularly to practitioners involved in facilitation of AL.

Therefore, although Robson and McCartan (2016) claim that thematic analysis is not a ‘branded’ form of analysis, in comparison to grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis, discourse analysis and conversational analysis, I would argue its generic and flexible feature offers an early career qualitative researcher a chance to construct an organising frame

which is specific to the purpose of the research and enabled me to understand and interpret the data. This, I hope will lead to the emergence of theory that could not otherwise have been articulated which, to me seems more appropriate than the kudos or brand implication of the chosen method of analysis.

3.8 My Role as *Insider Researcher*

The concept of ‘social situatedness’, originally put forward by Vygotsky (1962), and situatedness in terms of learning, developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), is that the development of individual intelligence requires both social and cultural influences and the multiple perspectives needed for understanding which are provided by context. In the context of this study, situatedness arises from the interplay between myself, the researcher, the situation, my role as a senior lecturer and practitioner academic at Middlesex University Business School and specifically my role in the Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management, as a facilitator of action learning within the programme. Here, I am an insider researcher, researching and developing my own practice in collaboration with others in my work place. As I have been closely involved with this programme, as the programme co-ordinator, programme tutor and action learning facilitator, I have had a unique opportunity to study my research focus with my ‘insider’ knowledge. I have also worked closely with three other academics involved in the delivery of this programme, which gives me the opportunity to undertake this research as a social learning process, a co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2008), to study issues of mutual interests. Also, this is an on-going area of my work where I have had the opportunity to review practice, open up issues for critical inquiry and discussion, integrate personal and professional learning and initiate change as a part of action research processes.

However, I acknowledge that there may be tensions between being a practitioner and being a researcher at the same time. First, I am an interested participant rather than a detached observer, so while guarding against subjectivity in researching my own practice, I had to also put myself at the centre of my research, showing rather than hiding my influences on what I am reporting. Second, I was challenged to maintain the right balance between my research and my work to ensure that I neither cut corners, nor impose an idealised and rigid research model. Here, my action research approach enabled me to weave in cycles of review, reflections and action, which

were incorporated into the work plan of the team and participants involved in this research (Figure 15). Thus, in the organisational context, I worked within the structure of my work situation and managed my dual role in relation to the delivery of the programme and my research agenda, involving my work colleagues as co-researchers. This, of course, raised ethical considerations, which I cover in the next section.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics refers to the moral principles guiding research (Economic and Social Research Council, *ESRC*, 2004) or as Homan (1991:1) puts it, ‘the science of morality’. This means conducting research in a way that goes beyond merely adopting the most appropriate research methodology, but conducting research in a responsible and morally defensible way (Gray, 2013). As an action researcher engaged in a process of co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2008) on issues of mutual interests (Marshall, 2011), my ethical responsibility goes beyond the conventional contractual relationship to covenantal ethics which is reciprocal and responsive in nature (Brydon-Miller, 2009). This involved taking responsibility to act in the best interests of others (Hilsen, 2006), including avoiding harm to participants, ensuring informed consent of participants, respecting the privacy of participants and avoiding the use of deception (Diener and Crandall, 1978). This required an overall professional accountability, both at an individual level and also, to maintain mutually reciprocal relationships with co-researchers and participants.

I addressed the practical implications of a covenantal ethics process within the research project by first, presenting my research agenda and securing consent for the research from the Mental Health Trust. This is further discussed in Chapter 4, section 4.2. Secondly, the aim of my research is to explore possibilities of improved practice of AL facilitation *with* others rather than conduct research *on* others. I have valued and fully acknowledged interdependencies with my research participants, particularly my mutual and complementary relationships with my co-AL facilitators in developing new knowledge and new practice together. To act in the best interests of my research participants and also, to avoid ‘harm’ or ‘deception’ to the research participants, in the context of my study, I had to ensure that their involvement in the study did not produce anxiety or stress to participants, or produce negative emotional reactions. I achieved this by ensuring that participants were provided with sufficient and accessible

information about the research project so that they could make informed decisions as to whether to become involved or not (Crow *et al.*, 2006). I explained the aim and purpose, as well as the research approach, to all participants during the induction of the post graduate programme. A Participant Information Sheet (**Appendix 4**) was also made available to the research participants during the induction, which offers meaningful (avoiding jargons), succinct and timely information. Participants were given sufficient time to consider implications of participation and had the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw their participation, as a research respondent, at any time during the project which would have no consequence on their involvement as a programme delegate. The information also highlighted that with due respect for participants' privacy, the anonymity of individuals would be maintained at all times. These ethical issues are articulated in the ethics consent form (**Appendix 5**) to gain formal and signed consent from all participants. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all data related to this research has been recorded and stored, in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act (1998). The third aspect, which I considered within the ethics context, was to constantly question my own motives and actions throughout the research project (Brydon-Miller, 2009). I carefully reflected on my position as a worker researcher (and continue to do so), specifically referring to my current work roles and relevant expertise, acknowledging the advantages and disadvantages of my worker/researcher role and its potential impact on research ethics.

There are a number of 'researcher titles' I have identified with: '*insider*', '*practitioner-researcher*' and '*action researcher*' (Anderson 2004). I am an '*insider*' as I have been involved in "*researching in my own area of work in my own place of employment*" (Anderson, 2004). I am a '*practitioner-researcher*' because I am a Senior Lecturer for Middlesex University Business School, undertaking my doctoral study within the context of the Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management programme, developed in collaboration with Barnet Enfield and Haringey Mental Health Trust (BEH MHT), to meet its strategic and leadership development objectives, as well as facilitate academic qualifications for their managers through learning in the work place. The MHT has been keen to assess the impact of the programme on individual participants and has therefore, fully supported my research agenda as a part of the evaluation strategy of the programme. As the co-ordinator, link tutor and action learning facilitator of the programme, I work closely with my colleagues in the Organisation and Leadership Practice Team as we have the remit within the Leadership, Work and Organisations department to design and implement bespoke qualifications with businesses. In this respect,

this research project has been a core area of my current practice and in my role as a senior lecturer. I have undertaken this study in my organisation, which will result in the award of Doctorate in Professional Studies. However, my research is aimed to yield accurate and valid results, which have relevance beyond my own interest as a doctoral researcher.

I am also an '*action researcher*', involved in the continuous process of review, action, development and change, to improve the methods and approaches to the facilitation of learning in goal oriented groups in the context of action learning in an organisational leadership development programme. In this *insider researcher* role, being ethically involved more than just observing protocols, involved having a "dialogical attitude, in which you show yourself to be open to others opinions and insights and being prepared to learn with and from them" (McNiff, 2013:113). In learning from others, I have ensured that my role within the programme did not unduly affect the participants' responses during the focus group and interviews. Therefore, I approached the Learning and Development Manager at the MHT to co-facilitate the focus group with the programme leader and I. The interviews, with the participants in my Action Learning Set, were conducted by a colleague not involved in AL within the programme. Also, as an insider researcher, I have been conscious that it may be difficult to be critical of the processes that I am part of, the organisation I work for and the people I work with, as I am committed to my organisation and my colleagues. The involvement of my co-action learning facilitators in the research and study issues of mutual interests in a process of co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason 2008), has enabled me to adopt a critical and analytical approach in my research project, ensuring that my research and practice has become morally informed, which can add to the wealth of human knowledge (Gray, 2013).

I aim to disseminate my research findings more widely in the human resource development practitioner and academic community. I have drawn up a publication and authorship strategy to establish clarity on the use of data and authorship with Action Learning Facilitators on the Barnet Enfield Haringey Mental Health Trust (MHT) leadership programme for my doctoral study. This publication strategy, which has been agreed by every AL facilitator, will ensure that we all take responsibility for the appropriate use of the common data, as agreed (**Appendix 6**). This again, is in line with the principles of covenantal ethics, focusing on relationships and responsibility, to address the question of ownership and control of research results (Brydon-Miller, 2009). Finally, in presenting my research report, I have followed the plagiarism and copyright guidance, referenced my sources and attributed contributions to the relevant people,

followed the University's ethic protocol and ensured that the ethics form was signed and agreed, as required.

3.10 Summary

I aligned my values, practitioner experience and the rationale for this research to identify my philosophical stance and theoretical perspectives, which have informed my research methodology. In considering an appropriate 'framework' for the analysis of my research, my main consideration was to be able to demonstrate validity within my interpretations. I have, therefore, applied a 5-step process to demonstrate how the interpretations were reached. I reflected on my '*insider researcher*' role and considered the ethical implications of conducting the research. This has informed other elements of this research project and my practice as a facilitator of learning.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH PROJECT ACTIVITIES

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of my research is to examine the practice of the action learning facilitator, within the action learning process. To achieve this aim, my research was positioned within a series of action learning sessions, which are part of a bespoke Middlesex University Business School post-graduate leadership development programme commissioned by an English NHS Mental Health Trust aimed at improving the leadership capacity of mid-level managers through work-based learning (Lester and Costley, 2010). This gave me the opportunity to work as a researcher in a live project, which was part of my work practice as an action learning facilitator within the programme. As part of this research project, I have explored the practice of action learning over a period of nine months during the delivery of the programme, followed by programme evaluation (summative questionnaire and focus group) and final participants' interviews. It was crucial for me to create a research project that was congruent with my experience as a facilitator of learning and my understanding of the action learning process. Therefore, I wanted to ensure that it was practice-based, as well as collaborative, so that my co-action learning facilitators and I could deepen our insight and awareness of our practice as AL facilitators. The participants' experience of the facilitation was also a key element to understanding the conditions, processes and capabilities required to be an effective facilitator. In this chapter, I explain the activities and stages of the research study.

4.2 Organisational Endorsement to the Research Project

The first stage of the research project was to seek and secure consent for the research study from the MHT. I presented and discussed the aim and objectives of the research with the Head of Learning and Development at the trust. As the MHT was keen to evaluate the impact of the programme and participate in the dissemination of the findings, more widely through conferences, the organisation fully endorsed the research project. It was agreed that the proposed research would be presented to the programme participants during their induction on the 18th January 2016 and they would be given the opportunity to sign a formal consent form (as discussed in Chapter 3, section 3.9). Of the 15 participants, 14 signed the consent form on

the day. The participant, who asked for more time to consider the proposal, returned with her signed form at the next workshop and confirmed her co-operation with the research project.

4.3 The Mental Health Trust Post Graduate Programme in Leadership and Management

The research is positioned within a series of AL sessions, which is a part of this programme delivery. The Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management is designed by Middlesex University Business School, in partnership with Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health Trust (BEH MHT), to meet the strategic and leadership development objectives of the Trust and, at the same time, to facilitate academic qualifications through learning in the work place. The aim of the programme is to improve the leadership capacity of mid-level managers. The participants were sponsored by the MHT and their application to enrol on the programme was supported by their line managers. They were mainly in management roles, either with direct line management responsibilities, or with supervision and project involvement requiring people management capabilities, working at a range of different operational levels including clinical and non-clinical services. The programme has been delivered annually since its launch in 2014.

This research is positioned within the third cohort of this programme, which was delivered between January 2016 and September 2016, followed by completion of assessed coursework in December 2016. The programme consisted of six dedicated ‘study-days’ incorporating content on managing and leading people and teams and a series of four facilitated action learning sessions. The concept and practice of mindfulness was threaded into study days by planned learning activities and the art of ‘being in the moment’, as a technique, was applied within the action learning sessions. Assessment comprised a reflective review of professional learning and critical reflection of their personal leadership journey in the implementation of a ‘stretch-project’ within their workplace.

4.4 The ‘Study Days’

The programme included six leadership development workshops, referred to as ‘study days’, which were delivered between January 2016 and June 2016 (**Appendix 1**). The ‘study days’ were aimed at increasing knowledge of evidence-based theoretical frameworks of the external

and internal factors influencing performance, understanding of self and interpersonal behaviours informing and shaping leadership style and approaches to initiating and leading change interventions. I co-designed these workshops with another academic and delivered four out of the six workshops. The topics were as follows:

1. Leading and Managing People (relationship between management and leadership, different styles of management and leadership, values-based, distributed and transformational leadership).
2. Leading and Managing Change (the process of change, initiating and leading change, resistance to change – your own and others’, engaging people with and supporting through change).
3. Strategic Service Development (the meaning of strategy, National Health Trust Strategy, strategies for service improvement, strategy in your context).
4. Managing People Performance (the meaning of performance management, knowing your own biases, benchmarking and evidence-based decision making and difficult conversations).
5. Team Learning and Development (team formation, roles, working together, and working across teams, challenges and power dynamics).
6. Personal and Leadership Development (your professional learning, understanding your learning/leadership styles/preferences, exploring motives for leadership and underlying assumptions/issues, learning disabilities).

4.5 Integration of Mindfulness Practice with the Study Days

The concept and practice of mindfulness was threaded into study days by the planned learning activities. In the first study day, the ‘healthy mind platter’ (Rock *et al.*, 2016 ; Siegel 2012) and its daily essential mental activities (focus time, play time, connecting time, physical time, time in, down time and sleep time), which aim to optimize brain function and create well-being, was used as an introductory discussion for participants to consider: What should be the healthy balance? and, in reality, What is the balance? The managers engaged in group discussion to talk about their current ‘healthy mind balance’ and what they will do about it. Wide-ranging actions were considered in each group; from exercises, walking, yoga and taking holidays to self-awareness, reflection, ‘switching off’ and mindfulness meditation.

As a part of the study day on managing and leading change, along with Kubler-Ross (1969) and Bridges' (2010) change models, Scharmer's (2009) U-theory was presented and discussed. Here, the U-theory was offered as a framework which can be applied to release stress, confusion and rigid thinking and be more tuned into what is essential and what is possible. The 'seven meditative spaces for leadership', enabled participants to consider calmness, stillness and quietness, as a way of looking for real answers to questions. Participants were asked to consider/reflect on the link between the practice of leadership and the practice of mindfulness using this theory.

As a part of a session on service development, participants had to contemplate how they could be 'mindful' in implementing service improvements; the opportunities and benefits, as well as the obstacles and risks, to be considered. In managing the performance of others, they were required to evaluate health and wellbeing, versus performance balance and how to manage the welfare of all parties, including their own, in a performance conversation mindfully with a specific activity on demonstrating compassion to others. Other mindfulness activities included: mindful listening and how to respond to negative emotions using mindfulness, carrot and stick versus alignment of values, and acceptance versus avoidance as a mindful approach in leading and managing teams.

4.6 Action Learning Sets

The programme also involved facilitation of action learning sets to provide a safe and confidential forum for participants to consider their current leadership and/or management issues and apply relevant leadership concepts, models and contexts addressed within the study days to gain deeper and new insights, to enable them to resolve real work problems (Dilworth and Willis 2003). The participants formed three AL sets with five members in each set. I worked closely with the Head of Learning and Development at the MHT in the formation of these sets. We ensured that the sets were a mixed group of clinical and non-clinical managers and that an AL member did not have his/her direct line manager in the same set. Four half-day sessions were scheduled between the study days to deepen the understanding of key concepts, develop skills of dialogue and reflect on practice to support peers as they addressed issues and increased their organisational knowledge and confidence through the network. I was the AL facilitator for set 1 (**Appendix 2**). I designed and structured a simple process for each AL

session, in consultation with two of the other AL facilitators and we used them as a guide/frame to facilitate each of our AL sets. The sets were facilitated on the same day by three different AL facilitators; 2 sets met from 9.30am to 1pm at two different hospital settings within the MHT and one set was facilitated in the afternoon from 1.30pm to 5pm, also at a hospital setting. During the first AL session, members were given a handout on AL (this was already introduced in the induction) and key concepts were discussed again (**Appendix 7**). Overall, the three-and-half hour session was planned as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: AL session timetable.

Timings (approx.)	Activities /processes
9.30am to 10am/ 1.30pm to 2pm	AL process – explanation/ reminder and questions Checking- in
10am to 12.30pm/ 2pm to 4.30pm	Air space 30 minutes for each participant
12.30pm to 13:00pm / 4.30pm to 5pm	Checking out

The structure and process of the four AL sessions are shown below:

Action Learning Set 1st of 4 (Tuesday 23rd February 2016)

First 30 minutes (approx.): Welcome; introduce ALS process and protocols; all part of your own development but with a learning framework, e.g. these ALS's and the PG Cert; you have been given permission to be here by the Trust to develop...reminder to give *yourself* permission to be here both physically and mentally.

Check in and check out: Each member is given a few minutes at the beginning and end of each session to share their thoughts and feelings of the moment to create a collective, safe space of reflection.

Check - in

Step 1: Apply practice of mindfulness.

Exercise: Five-minute meditation to '*becoming aware of yourself*'.

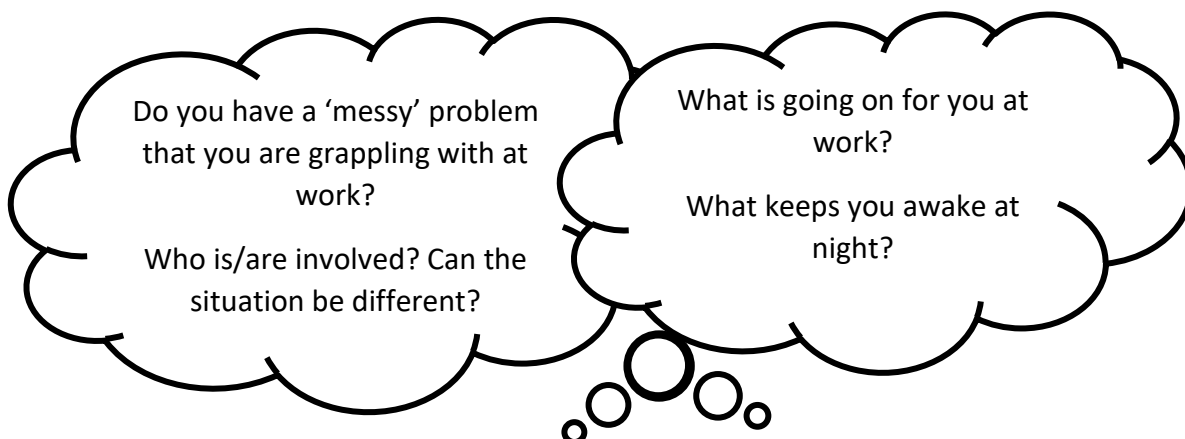
Deliberately adopt an erect and dignified posture. If possible, close your eyes. Then, bring your awareness to your inner experience and acknowledge it, asking: what is my experience right now?

What *thoughts* are going through your mind? Acknowledge the thoughts as mental events. What *feelings* are here? Is there any sense of discomfort or unpleasant feelings, acknowledging them without trying to make them different from how you find them? What *body sensations* are here right now? Quickly scan the body to pick up any sensations of tightness or bracing, acknowledging the sensations, but, once again, not trying to change them in any way.

Step 2: Each member is then encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings to help them to feel connected to the group/set.

INDIVIDUAL AIRTIME: 30 minutes for each participants

Identify a 'messy' problem(s) that you are grappling with, ideally in your current organisational role so that the facilitator and ALS members, as comrades in adversity/comrades in opportunity could begin to help you to learn.



Final 30 minutes (approx.): Check-out; share your thoughts/feelings from the session.

What will you take away from this session?

What did you learn about the situation and yourself?

What action will you take?

Action Learning Set 2nd of 4 (Tuesday 5th April 2016)

First 30 minutes (approx.): Welcome; Thanks for coming; Reminder of ALS process and protocols; all part of your own development but with a learning framework, e.g. these ALS's and the PG Cert; you have been given permission to be here to develop by the Trust...reminder to give *yourself* permission to be here both physically and mentally.

Check in and check out: Each member is given a few minutes at the beginning and end of each session to share their thoughts and feelings of the moment to create a collective, safe space of reflection.

Check - in

Step 1: Apply practice of mindfulness

Exercise: Five-minute meditation to ‘*becoming aware of yourself*’.

Deliberately adopt an erect and dignified posture. If possible, close your eyes. Then, bring your awareness to your inner experience and acknowledge it, asking: what is my experience right now?

What *thoughts* are going through your mind? Acknowledge the thoughts as mental events.

What *feelings* are here? Is there any sense of discomfort or unpleasant feelings, acknowledging them without trying to make them different from how you find them?

What *body sensations* are here right now? Quickly scan the body to pick up any sensations of tightness or bracing, acknowledging the sensations, but, once again, not trying to change them in any way.

You may want to focus on your breathing. Start by breathing in and out slowly. One cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body. Let go of your thoughts for a minute. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending work that need your attention. Simply let yourself be still.

Step 2: Each member is then encouraged to:

First, to briefly share their experience of the mindfulness practice.

What did you notice? What did the process make you think? Is there anything you would like to share?

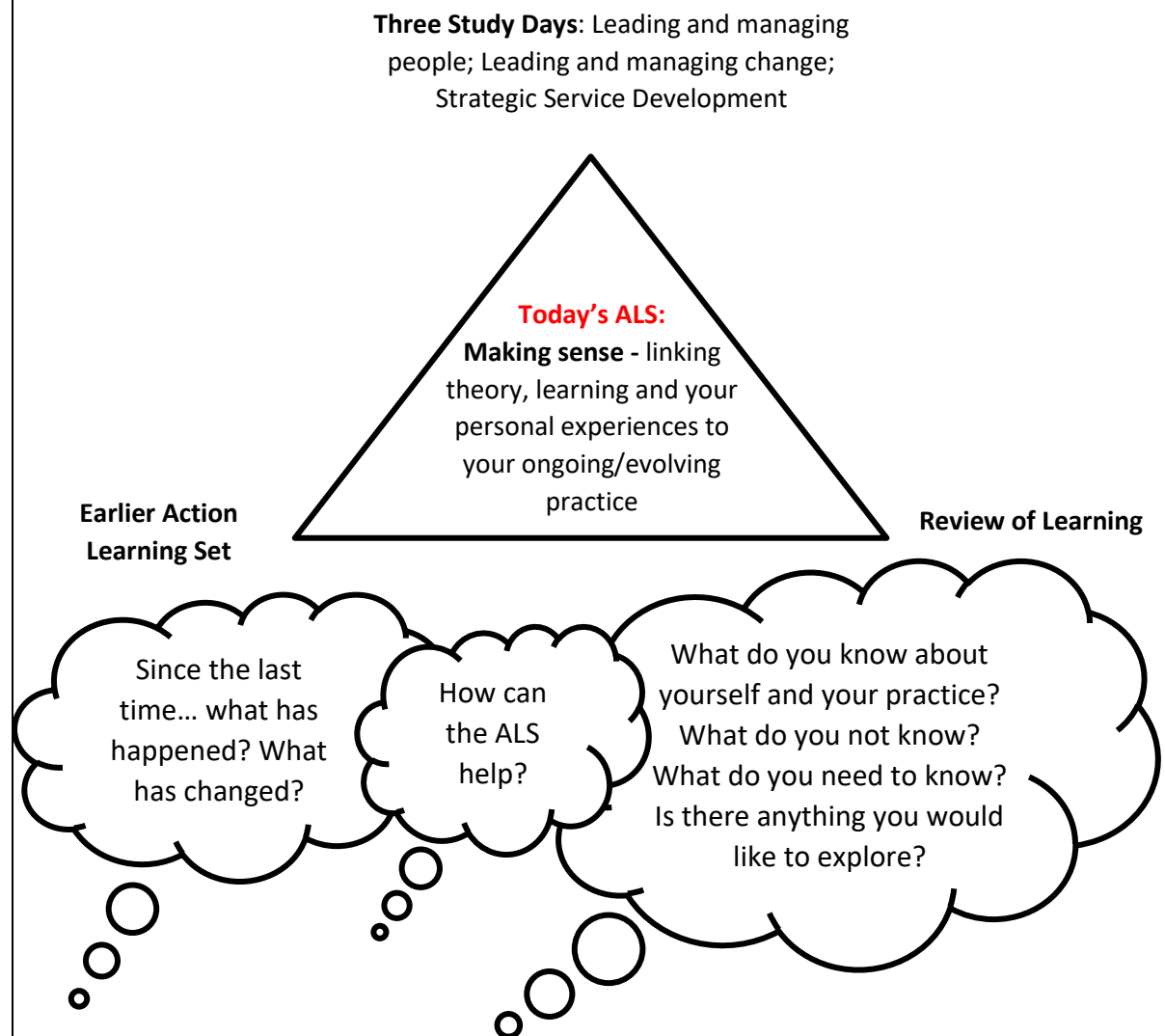
Second, to ‘check-in’, e.g. share their present thoughts and feelings to help them to feel connected to the group/set.

What are you bringing to the room today? Your thoughts/feelings you may want to share with the group?

INDIVIDUAL AIRTIME: 30 minutes for each participants

The last time we were together you told your story in order to situate yourself, to indicate some of your organisational challenges (your ‘messy’ problem(s) that you are grappling with) and so that the ALS, as comrades in adversity/comrades in opportunity could begin to help you to learn.

Today's ALS will continue that process and begin to bring together a number of elements of the journey so far.



Final 30 minutes (approx.): Check-out; share your thoughts/feelings from the session.

What will you take away from this session?

What did you learn about the situation and yourself?

What action will you take?

Action Learning Set 3rd of 4 (Tuesday 7th June 2016)

First 30 minutes (approx.): Welcome; Thanks for coming; Reminder of ALS process and protocols; all part of your own development but with a learning framework, e.g. these ALS's

and the PG Cert; you have been given permission to be here to develop by the Trust...reminder to give *yourself* permission to be here both physically and mentally.

Check in and check out: Each member is given a few minutes at the beginning and end of each session to share their thoughts and feelings of the moment to create a collective, safe space of reflection.

Check - in

Step 1: Apply practice of mindfulness.

Exercise 1: Five-minute meditation to ‘*becoming aware of yourself*’

Deliberately adopt an erect and dignified posture. If possible, close your eyes. Then, bring your awareness to your inner experience and acknowledge it, asking: what is my experience right now?

- What *thoughts* are going through your mind? Acknowledge the thoughts as mental events.
- What *feelings* are here? Is there any sense of discomfort or unpleasant feelings, acknowledging them without trying to make them different from how you find them?
- What *body sensations* are here right now? Quickly scan the body to pick up any sensations of tightness or bracing, acknowledging the sensations, but, once again, not trying to change them in any way.

You may want to focus on your breathing. Start by breathing in and out slowly. One cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body. Let go of your thoughts for a minute. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending work that need your attention. Simply let yourself be still.

Exercise 2: Guided Imagery

Take some deep breaths, close your eyes. Imagine yourself in a beautiful scene in nature. Feel the air, smell the scents around you, the warmth of the air on your skin, notice the colour of the sky. Be still and enjoy this wonderful environment. Notice a well-worn path leading into the distance toward some woods. Follow the path. Notice the texture of the ground

underfoot, the sounds near and far, the light, the vegetation, the wildlife, and the smells as you move farther and farther along the path. You cross over a stream, pausing to listen and feel the water, and then continue along the path. Soon the path emerges out of the woods and opens into a colourful meadow filled with wildflowers. Walk back into the bright light and notice a magnificent old tree on the hillside. Walk to the tree and sit under it for a few moments, appreciating its magnificence. The tree may have a message for you. Listen closely. Notice the words, images, and feelings that come up for you. When you are ready, follow the path back the way you came, through the woods, crossing the stream, and eventually back to the pleasant place where you started the journey. Know you can return to this place and to anywhere you visited on your own whenever you like. Now it is time to come back fully.

Step 2: Each member is then encouraged to:

First, to briefly share their experience of the mindfulness practice.

What did you notice? What did the process make you think? Is there anything you would like to share?

How many were able to find a place to start with? How many found a tree? Did the tree have anything for you? What did you see? Was there anything unexpected (scary, fun, confusing, helpful, etc.)? What did you take away?

Second, ‘check-in’, e.g. share their present thoughts and feelings to help them to feel connected to the group/set.

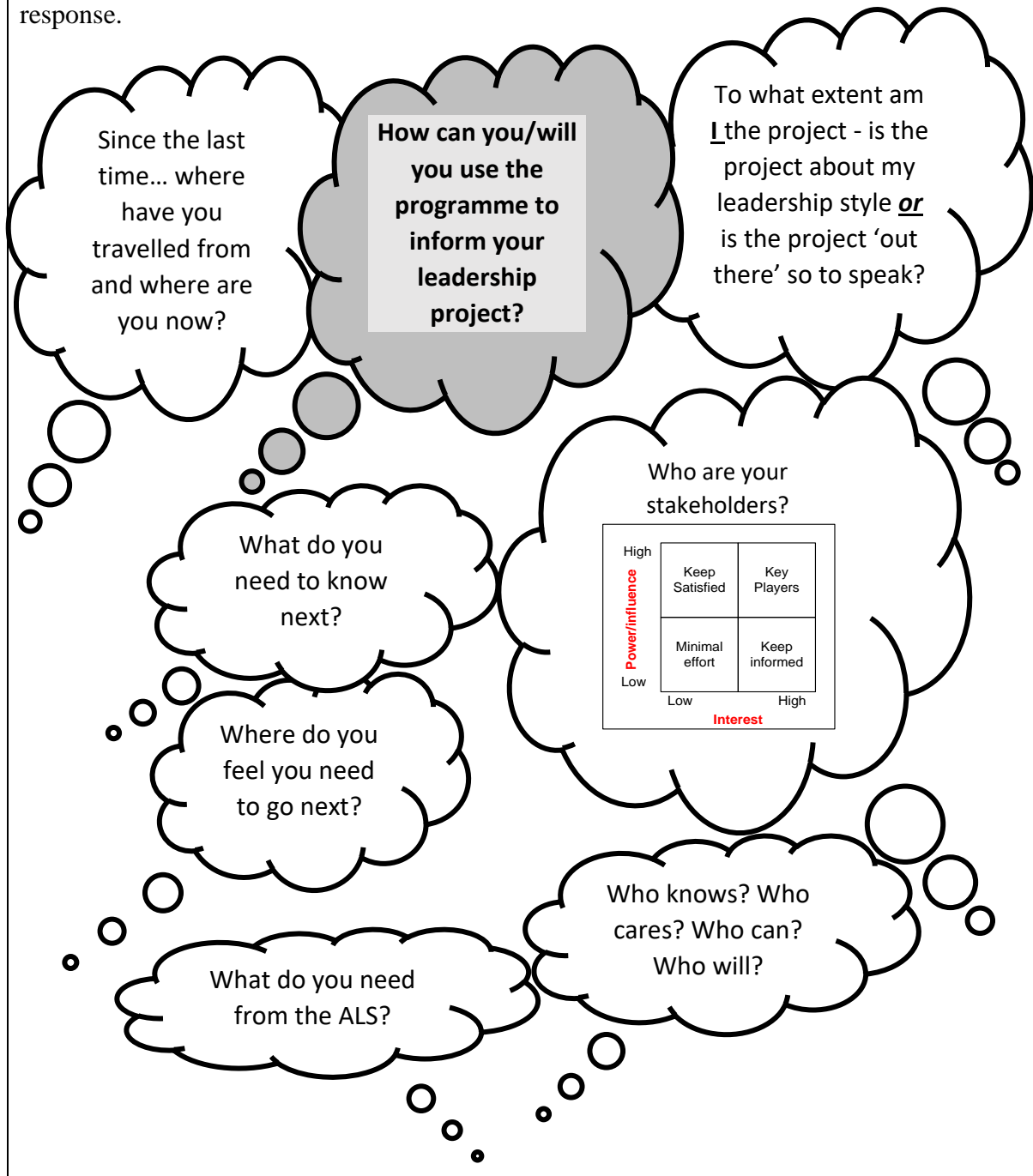
What are you bringing to the room today? Your thoughts/feelings you may want to share with the group?

INDIVIDUAL AIRTIME: 30 minutes for each participants

The last time we were together you focused on linking theory from the study days to your personal experiences and ongoing/evolving practice and your overall learning so far from the programme.

Today's ALS will continue that process and begin to bring together your project and the programme.

Look at these questions. Can you select two or three and share with us what you think in response.



Final 30 minutes (approx.): Check-out; share your thoughts/feelings from the session.

- ✓ What will you take away from this session?
- ✓ What did you learn about the situation and yourself?
- ✓ What action will you take?

Action Learning Set 4th of 4 (Tuesday 19th July 2016)

First 30 minutes (approx.): Welcome; Thanks for coming; Reminder of ALS process and protocols; all part of your own development but with a learning framework, e.g. these ALS's and the PG Cert; you have been given permission to be here to develop by the Trust...reminder to give *yourself* permission to be here both physically and mentally.

Check in and check out: Each member is given a few minutes at the beginning and end of each session to share their thoughts and feelings of the moment to create a collective, safe space of reflection.

Check - in

Step 1: Apply practice of mindfulness.

Exercise: Five-minute meditation to ‘becoming aware of yourself’

Deliberately adopt an erect and dignified posture. If possible, close your eyes. Then, bring your awareness to your inner experience and acknowledge it, asking: what is my experience right now?

What *thoughts* are going through your mind? Acknowledge the thoughts as mental events.

What *feelings* are here? Is there any sense of discomfort or unpleasant feelings, acknowledging them without trying to make them different from how you find them?

What *body sensations* are here right now? Quickly scan the body to pick up any sensations of tightness or bracing, acknowledging the sensations, but, once again, not trying to change them in any way.

You may want to focus on your breathing. Start by breathing in and out slowly. One cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body. Let go of your thoughts

for a minute. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending work that need your attention. Simply let yourself be still.

Step 2: Each member is then encouraged to:

First, to briefly share their experience of the mindfulness practice.

What did you notice? What did the process make you think? Is there anything you would like to share?

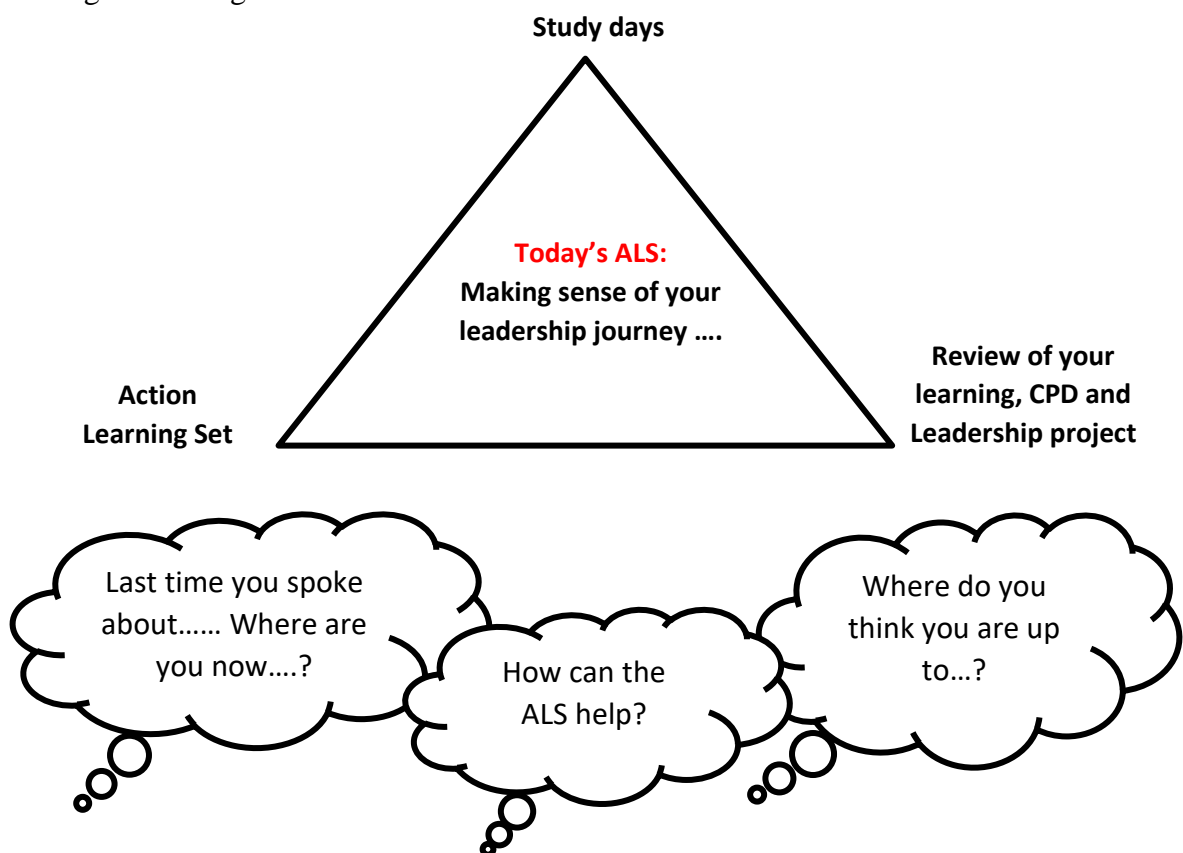
Second, to 'check-in', e.g. share their present thoughts and feelings to help them to feel connected to the group/set.

What are you bringing to the room today? Your thoughts/feelings you may want to share with the group?

INDIVIDUAL AIRTIME: 30 minutes for each participants

The last time we were together you talked about your project and your leadership role within the project.

Today's ALS will continue that process, particularly your leadership journey offering an opportunity to bring together the various elements of the Post Graduate leadership and Management Programme.



Final 30 minutes (approx.): Check-out; share your thoughts/feelings from the session.

What will you take away from this session?

What did you learn about the situation and yourself?

What action will you take?

In designing the structure of these AL sessions, I was guided by my two years' experience of facilitating AL sessions within the same programme, with Cohort 1 (2014) and Cohort 2 (2015). I also planned and implemented the evaluation for this programme for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, which demonstrated what worked well in these sessions. Overall, the evaluation findings clearly indicated that action learning was enabling the participants to reflect and take actions, as suggested in the literature (Boshyk, 2002; O'Neil and Marsick 2007; Raelin, 2008; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Leonard and Land, 2010). However, the role of the facilitator in this process was less clear which initiated this research, as discussed in Chapter 1. The other point to note here is that, although I took the lead in designing the structure of these AL sessions, the final version of each of the four AL sessions were agreed jointly, often via email conversations with the other two AL facilitators, going through a process of drafts and revisions. An example of such an email conversation is presented in **Appendix 8**. Thus, the structure and processes were 'owned' by all three facilitators, as I fully engaged them in the planning process.

4.7 Personal Reflections

One of my observations from the AL facilitation of the previous two cohorts of the post-graduate programme was that the three of us who facilitated the AL sessions had different approaches to maintaining records or notes from the AL sessions. One of the facilitators who was the most experienced academic of the three, but with no previous experience of AL, made comprehensive notes during the session which she referred to when we met as a group to review the sessions. I found it challenging to take detailed notes during the session and refer to this anxiety in my written observation below;

'I think what I need to do and I'm not good at this... I never can write at the same time and facilitate, you do this so well 'x'...I need to develop it, it would be good if we could write down

some of the questions we are asking, because that's what's going to surface, what did I say, what did I ask...'

The other two facilitators made 'ad hoc' notes and one occasionally recorded his reflections digitally on his way home after the sessions; he had a long train journey. They also referred to this in the group reflections:

'You've got, to me, a tremendous amount of notes there....I am just fascinated by the amount that you managed to write down...' (AL facilitator 2).

'Yours are more thorough than mine, I mean, I've got sort of like, you know, phrases and bullet points ...they are not as thorough as yours...' (AL facilitator 1).

This discussion made me realise that I just about managed to make notes of the key points and the checkout responses. I recognised that I had to consider a method of recording details that happened at the sessions to be able to address my own research questions. Thus, for the purpose of the research, as mentioned in Chapter 3.5.1, I used a diary narrative as a method of recording my observations, including participant observations after each action learning facilitation session. As my AL sessions were in the morning, I cleared my work diary for the afternoon so that I could write up my narrative straight after each of the four AL sessions. I recorded four personal reflections on the 23rd February, 5th April, 7th June and 19th July; they were between 2700 to 1500 words each and included issues raised during individual 'air space', questions/comments from other members, my own questions, checking-in and checking-out responses and general observations of the sessions. These personal reflections will be used to present my findings in Chapter 5. Some extracts of the reflections are presented in **Appendix 9**. On reflection, I should have asked the two other AL facilitators to also provide me with their record of personal reflections; this would have added to the richness of the data. However, I had not considered this at the time as we were going to discuss our experiences in the group reflections. I will discuss this further in Chapter 7, when I reflect on my doctoral journey.

4.8 Group Reflective Gatherings (GRG's)

The 'group reflective gathering' (GRG) sessions, following each of the AL sessions, evolved from regular reviews of the AL sessions during the delivery of the first cohort of the post graduate programme, to a more formalised group reflective sessions in Cohorts 2 and 3. As we started to facilitate the AL sessions in the first cohort, it became clear to us that the participants on the programme were dealing with challenging work situations, on-going organisational changes and some were struggling to cope. As facilitators, we were hearing and responding to some stressful individual situations and it was agreed within the delivering team that the GRGs would provide an opportunity to share experience, reflect and review practice; this was introduced in Cohort 2. It was through participating in the GRG process with my co-facilitators that I first started to be aware that each facilitator may be guided by their own core principles, values and previous experience and this may impact their style of facilitation. This raised several questions for me about what was happening in the AL learning space and the role of the facilitator with it. Consequently, in Cohort 3, which was the specific context of my research, I invited my co-AL facilitators to be my co-researchers in this co-operative inquiry (Shani and Pasmore, 1985; Heron and Reason, 2008), as a part of my action research process, which was agreed. To support my research inquiry, I proposed three questions to guide our conversations within these reflective gatherings.

1. What did we do to facilitate the AL members to learn and take action?
2. What were we thinking, while facilitating the AL sessions? Any thoughts/ideas that came to mind during the session?
3. What were we feeling, while facilitating the AL sessions? How did we deal with emotions, ours and others in the AL sessions?

On guidance from the university's research approval panel, I drew up an authorship and publication strategy for the use of the data from the GRGs, which was agreed by all AL facilitators (**Appendix 6**). I have referred to this in Section 3.12. I scheduled the group reflective gathering after each of the four AL sessions.

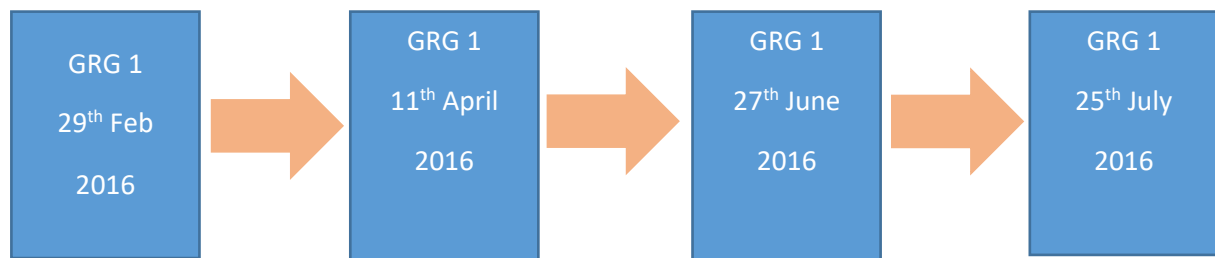


Figure 17. Group Reflective Gatherings (GRG's).

These GRG sessions were approximately 3 hours each and attended by four academics, who were involved in the delivery of the post graduate programme. Three of us were AL facilitators on Cohort 3 of the programme and the fourth member had been an AL facilitator in the previous cohorts and co-facilitated the workshops with me for Cohort 3.

Although we did not refer to these sessions as action learning, there was some similarity in the way we used the space. We started with 5 minutes of mindfulness practice, partly to maintain the practice and also to use it as a method of raising our awareness and 'being in the present moment'. Then, each of us reflected on our experience of the AL session we had facilitated, with others asking questions and making contributions. Therefore, there were both individual, as well as collective, reflections within this process enabling us to consider our practice, its impact and what we could do differently to improve it for the next session. In fact, I designed the AL structure/process for each of the sessions, based on our reflective gathering conversations. These sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed. Extracts from the GRG's are presented in **Appendix 10**. This participation in the GRG's, enabled me to engage in the second person action research (Marshall, 2001), as referred to in Chapter 3 (Section 3.4). This added further rigour to my research inquiry and gave me the opportunity to get further insight into the practice of action learning facilitation.

4.9 Programme Evaluation

To be able to analyse the impact of the post graduate programme on the participants, the MHT and Middlesex University, a set of measures and methods were used to evaluate the programme. The evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and support, meeting individual

goals and aspirations, organisational impact and areas for improvement. I designed a pre and post evaluation questionnaire and a focus group as a part of the evaluation process.

4.9.1 Questionnaire

The pre and post evaluation questionnaires, including self-assessment on individual and organisational impact (**Appendix 11**), were used to assess the participants' learning and development experience and its impact on individual participants and the organisation. The pre-evaluation questionnaires were completed by the participants during the induction on the 18th January, 2016. The post-evaluation questionnaires were given to the participants during the focus group session on the 7th September, 2016. All completed questionnaires were received, after several follow-up emails, by the end of November, 2016. I analysed both sets of questionnaires and prepared a summary of the evaluation of the MHT Post Graduate programme, Cohort 3 (see relevant extracts from the report, **Appendix 12**).

4.9.2 Focus Group

The overall purpose of the focus group was to capture the participants' experience of this programme, to be able to fully analyse the impact of the programme. I conducted the session using two action research methods: appreciative inquiry and dialogue. Two exercises were devised using each method. The exercises provided an opportunity for the participants to share their experiences of the programme, including the AL sessions and encouraged active participation to contextualise their learning and agree on common themes.

4.9.3 Action Research using Appreciative Inquiry

The first exercise was designed to use 'appreciative inquiry' (Cooperrider *et al.*, 2000). The use of 'appreciative enquiry' can encourage a group to identify positive experiences and reflect on why and how it was so positive (Cooperrider *et al.*, 2000). My aim was to facilitate the group to identify their peak experiences and make sense of the data. I arranged the lay out of the room to maximise interaction; chairs were laid out in a circle so that discussions could flow easily. The exercise required the delegates, in pairs, to share a situation with each other (for 10 minutes) where the programme had a positive impact on them. They were reminded to consider different elements of the programme, including their experience of AL. They were encouraged

to conjure up a picture in their mind of what was happening and share this with their partner using the following questions: What was happening that made it different/unique?, Were others involved in this experience?, What were their feelings about participating?, What was the learning?, How will this impact on practice? Following this, they then had to meet up with other pairs and share their experiences with the group. Finally, they were encouraged to list the common themes which emerged from all of their experiences which were listed on a flip chart. This exercise took 30 minutes. I ensured that there were two other co-facilitators with me at the focus group to engage the participants and to avoid any undue effect on the participants' responses. I have discussed this in Chapter 3 (section 3.12).

4.9.4 Action Research Using Dialogue

The second exercise was designed to capture data and validate its outcomes through 'dialogue' (Bohm, 1985; 2006). A set of trigger questions was presented to the group:

1. Were any of content/sessions of the programme not relevant to your learning and development?
2. Did you face any issues/challenges during the programme? If so, what were they?
3. What improvements could be made for future implementation of the programme?

The group was encouraged to begin a dialogue around each of the trigger questions, ensuring that only one person responded at a time and everyone else paid full attention to the person speaking. The words spoken, were captured in a form which everyone can verify (e.g. on post-it notes), which were then clustered in underpinning themes with agreement of the participants. Finally, the outcome was validated by addressing the emerging issues and by asking the group the following two questions:

1. Are there key issues on which everyone agrees?
2. Are there key issues on which there is disagreement?

This exercise gave the group an opportunity to interact, reconstruct and ultimately, reformulate issues which were raised. As the group was encouraged to conclude the exercise by addressing the emerging issues, I was able to ensure that the exercise did not end up in just another discussion, but ended in a process of 'sense making' (Weick, 1979; 1995) which validated the outcomes. I typed up the summary of the session, including the themes that emerged and some individual comments/feedback (relevant extracts can be seen in **Appendix 13**). I was able to

draw on this evaluation data to understand the participants' view of AL, what worked for them and how they were able to use the process to think, reflect and take action to improve their management and leadership practice.

4.9.5 Participant Interviews

The final stage of the research project involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the programme participants and the other AL facilitators. The interviews with the programme participants were planned and agreed with them at the beginning of the programme, as discussed in Chapter 3, section 3.5.2. I went through several iterations and lengthy discussions with my advisers before finalising a set of questions for the participants (**Appendix 14**). I did not initially plan the interviews with the other AL facilitators. However, early analysis of the transcripts highlighted that as group reflective gathering conversation emerged, although these conversations provided some excellent data and validation of practice, some of the discussions did not always relate to my initial research questions. Therefore, I devised a set of four questions based on my initial questions on the AL practice of 'doing, thinking and feeling' (**Appendix 15**) and conducted semi-structured interviews with the AL facilitators who had participated in the GRG's. This enabled triangulation of data analysis and added rigour and validity to the process. All interviews were digitally recorded and I transcribed each interview (**Appendix 16, 17**). Extracts from these will be presented and analysed in Chapter 5.

4.10 Summary

I consider that I have developed a research project that meets the action research criteria of validity, robustness and trustworthiness of the inquiry (Herr and Anderson, 2005; Bradbury and Reason, 2011), in terms of the levels of reflection to improve practice during the research process and that the outcomes were both an action and a research outcome, unlike traditional research approaches, which aim only to create knowledge (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006).

In closing this section, I offer the following:

“We believe that the outcome of good research is not just books and academic papers, but is also the creative action of people to address matters that are important to them. Of course, it is

concerned too with revisiting our understanding of our world, as well as transforming the practice within it” (Heron and Reason, 2001:144).

I have identified and engaged in these research activities with an attitude of inquiry (Marshall and Reason, 2007) and commitment to exploring the role of facilitation, in which I have been involved in various shapes and forms from my early childhood (as explored in Chapter 1). Whether in my ‘big sister’ role in my younger years, or in my career as a human resource development practitioner, my intention has always been to facilitate the learning of others by encouraging the individual to be the focal point of the learning process. Through these project activities, I have attempted to focus on the practice on AL learning ‘to reflect and act fluidly in context and to maintain curiosity about what is happening’ (Marshall, 2011: 175), by incorporating the three voices and audiences; first, second and third persons (Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Coghlan and Brannick, 2010). In the next chapter, in capturing and analysing what was happening within the AL sets through my own and the group reflections, programme evaluations and participant interviews, I weave together my inner and outer ‘arcs of attention’ (Marshall, 2001; Marshall, 2016), framing and making sense of my ‘inner’ reflections, as well paying attention to the ‘outer’ patterns of thought, feedback, insight and experience of others involved in this research.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH PROJECT FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I report on the process of data analysis, the themes which become apparent and the key findings of the research inquiry. I have used thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I have applied the flexibility offered in thematic analysis, to minimally organise and describe a set of rich qualitative data (Robson and McCartan, 2016) from a range of different sources (Boyatzis, 1998). These sources include: personal reflection notes, transcripts of GRG's, programme evaluation feedback and action learning member and facilitator interviews.

My analytical process involved progression from initial observations by the participants on the effectiveness of the planned AL processes and structures, to descriptive quotes on learning, outcomes and overall impact of AL facilitation, where the data captured something important in relation to my research questions. As a next step, I then organised them to identify patterns and meaning within the data and finally coded them to theorise the significance of the patterns and their broader meaning and implications (Patton, 1990; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thus, the data captured the role and the style of AL facilitation over the period of delivery of the AL sessions. The comments of the AL facilitators, in the GRG's particularly, gave me the opportunity to note the changes and differences in the facilitation and its impact as the sessions progressed. I rated the 'keyness' or importance of a theme, not necessarily only on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I first present the process of building my own organising and interpretative framework to reflect reality and also, to unpick the surface of 'reality' (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the pedagogy of AL facilitation. Next, I present the key findings by displaying and analyzing the range of data sources to show how they relate to the emerging themes and the final set of constructs.

5.2 Process of Data Analysis

I have analysed and interpreted the data through a 5-step process, progressing from organising descriptive sets of words to show patterns, to summarise and interpret and finally to theorise

the significance of the patterns and their boarder meaning and implications (Patton, 1990; Braun and Clarke, 2006). A graphic representation of the 5-step process is shown in Figure 18.

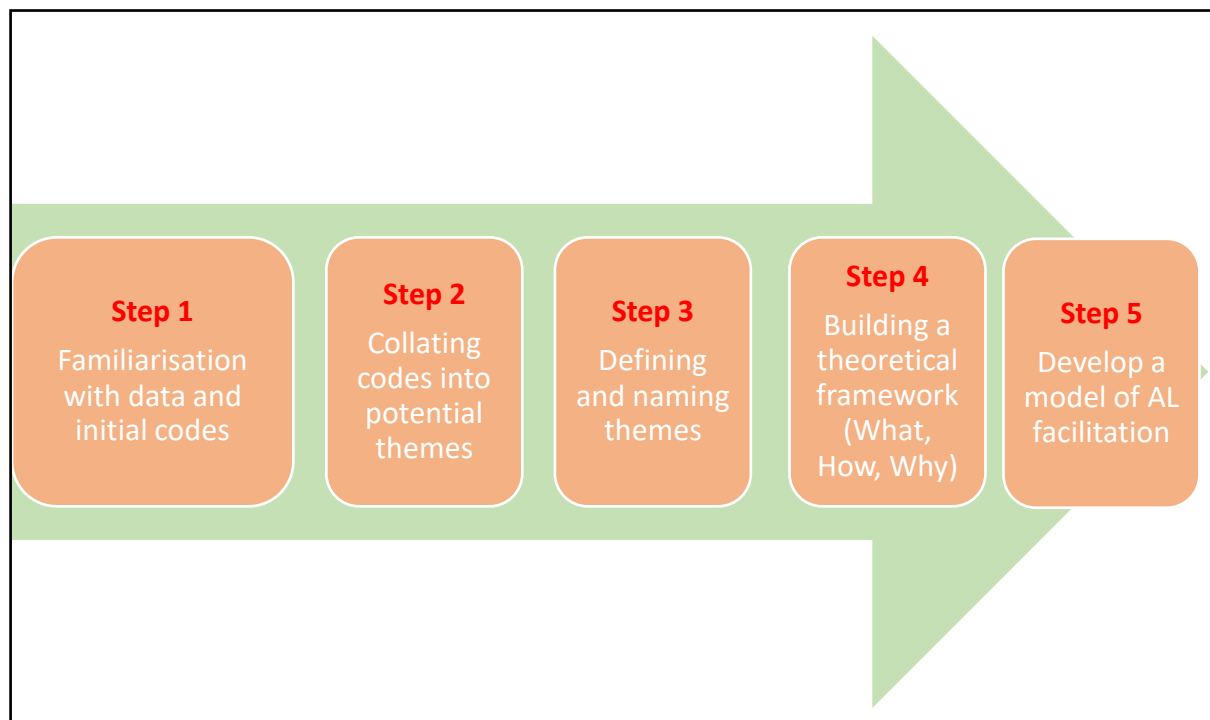


Figure 18: 5 Step Thematic Analysis.

5.2.1 Step 1 - Getting Familiar with the Data and Generating Initial Codes.

To identify a set of initial codes, I read and re-read the transcripts of my reflective notes and the GRG's. The process of data collection, through the semi structure interviews, was an invigorating experience. I appreciated the opportunity for one-to-one engagement with participants to gather responses to the interview questions; listening to them talk about their experience of action learning was immensely helpful to gain better understanding of the facilitation process, specifically the role of the facilitator; listening to the recording several times during the process of transcription helped to strengthen this further. I then read through all of the interview transcripts and coded them. This, along with the feedback from the end of programed questionnaire and themes emerging from the focus group, facilitated a degree of methodological triangulation which enabled me to develop a more detailed picture of the AL facilitation practice within the post graduate programme.

I decided to generate the initial codes based on the themes of the interview questions, as they correlated to my research questions, as well as my conceptual framework. The role and style of AL facilitation related to the literature on facilitation (Spencer, 1989; Heron, 1999; Hogan, 2000, 2005) and the AL ‘coach/advisor’ (Revans, 1980; Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Pedler, 2005; O’Neil and Marsick, 2007; Ram and Trehan, 2009; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Pedler and Abbott, 2013). I related the themes on managing emotions, differences and conflicts to the literature on group assumptions (Lewin, 1946; Bion, 1961, Bales, 1970, Blackwell, 1998; Thornton, 2016) and group learning (Bandura, 1977; Vince and Martin, 1993; Reynold and Trehan, 2003; Stern, 2004; Kayes *et al.*, 2005).

In preparing the data for analysis, I coded key words and phrases in the transcribed text in four colours, as shown below. This enable me to get familiar with the data. These broad themes covered analysis of the role of the AL facilitator and the style and approach of the facilitator, including the values that guided their practice. There was specific emphasis on managing emotions and differences, as the literature highlights that these could often be overlooked within a generic learning cycle (Vince and Martin, 1993; Vince, 2004, 2008). These broad themes were as follow:

- 1) Role of the AL facilitator
- 2) Style, approach, values of the AL facilitator (including models and theories applied)
- 3) Managing emotions in AL sessions
- 4) Managing differences and conflicts in AL sessions.

I listed all of the key words and phrases across all of the transcripts (**Appendix 16 and 17**) under these headings. The list under each heading was fairly long, some had up to 25 items (**Appendix 18**). I spent a long time trying to group and collapse the data further, to reduce the overall items under each heading. This was challenging as each phrase/set of words seemed to reflect distinctiveness of the individual ‘voice’ and I felt that they all needed to be represented. This is congruent to my underpinning research principles that humans actively construct their own meaning (Rand, 2013) and that experiences of individuals are unique in the social world (Crotty, 1998). Thus, as I tried to include all the phrases and sets of words, the lists became very long. The next logical step of the analysis was challenging and I struggled to move forward. Fortunately, I had a doctoral peer group discussion during this time, so I decided to present my dilemma there and seek guidance. In talking through how I had coded and grouped

the data with my peers, I realised that the headings of the themes, which I had taken from the research and interview questions, was my barrier. I needed to look at the data without being constrained by the themes of my own questions, particularly as the overall aim of my research is to establish the pedagogy of action learning.

5.2.2 Step 2 - Collating Codes by a Process of Arranging and Rearranging into Potential Themes

At this next stage, I decide to abandon the four themes I had identified earlier and work with the key words and phrases I had collated under each of these themes. I typed and cut out each of the words and phrases so that I could move them around to form clusters which, I could re-code and develop into themes that related to my overall research inquiry. As I went through a process of arranging and rearranging the codes into categories, themes began to emerge. This was a fluid process as I moved the codes around, modifying the categories, allowing the following final five themes to emerge through an iterative process:

- 1) Personal impact (Fig. 20).
- 2) Effective interpersonal skills (**Appendix 20**).
- 3) Individual and group reflection and learning (**Appendix 21**).
- 4) Work with diverse needs, challenges and emotions (**Appendix 22**).
- 5) Creating a supportive environment (**Appendix 23**).

Having gone through this process, I realised that the first step was not wasted as it had enabled me to undertake a thorough analysis across all four data sets and derive an initial set of coding. There was a large number of codes and phrases that related to the knowledge, experience and the values of the AL facilitator. I returned to the literature to confirm the manual coding and thematic process (Miles and Huberman, 1994) using the conceptual framework, shown in Figure 13.

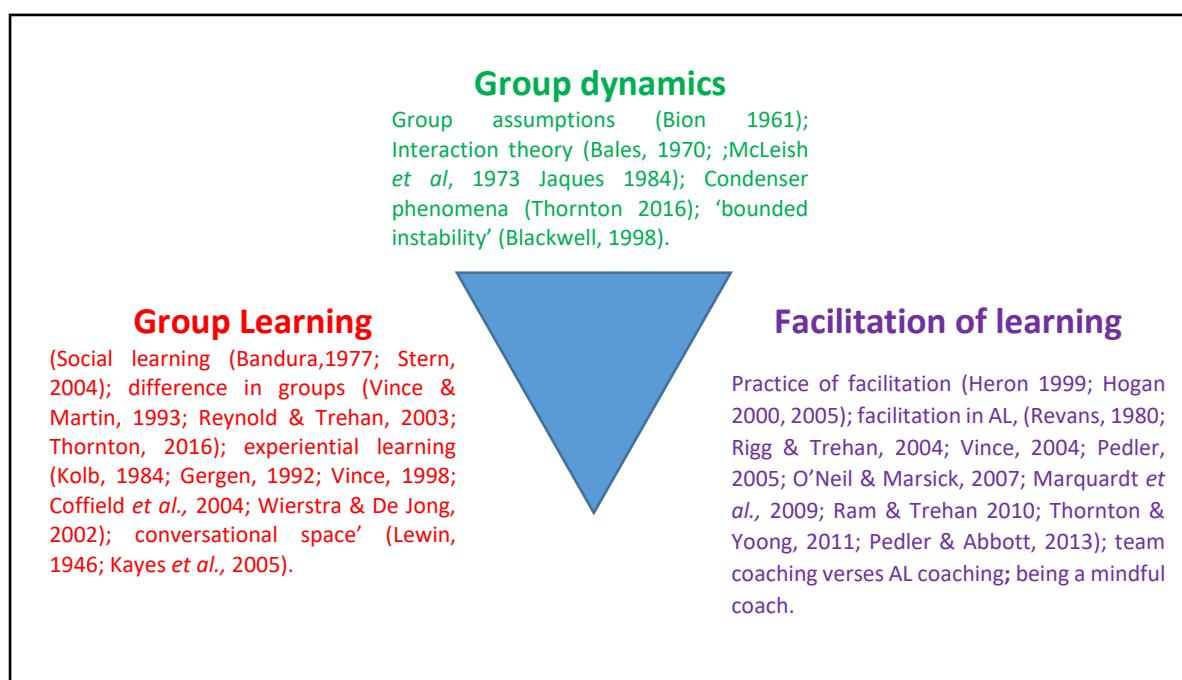


Figure 19. Action Learning Facilitation– a conceptual framework ©.

I was able to relate the AL facilitator's understanding and experience of group dynamics (Bion, 1961, Thornton, 2016), interaction theory (Bales, 1970; Jacques, 1984; McLeish *et al.*, 1973) and 'bounded instability' (Blackwell, 1998) to the knowledge, experience and values referred to by the respondents in the transcripts. I therefore, clustered these under the code, 'personal impact'. At this stage, this code was representative of the voices of the AL members and facilitators as they described the facilitator's approach, style and way of engaging with the AL members. I have later related this to the use of ones' personality traits, belief systems, life experiences and cultural heritage (DeWayne, 2006) and referred to this as 'use of self'. An example of how I worked with the codes is shown in Figure 20.

I used the same process to work through the rest of the 'codes' derived from Step 1. The interviewees identified a range of facilitation skills in describing the role of the AL facilitator, which related to the literature on facilitation of learning, such as guiding and encouraging open dialogue (Hogan 2000, 2005), helping and empowering through listening and giving feedback (Heron 1999) and encouraging thinking, reflection and problem solving through questioning, summarising, rephrasing and feedback (Revas, 1980; Pedler, 2005; Marquardt, 2004; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; Pedler and Abbott, 2013). Therefore, 'effective interpersonal skills' emerged as the second theme (**Appendix 20**).

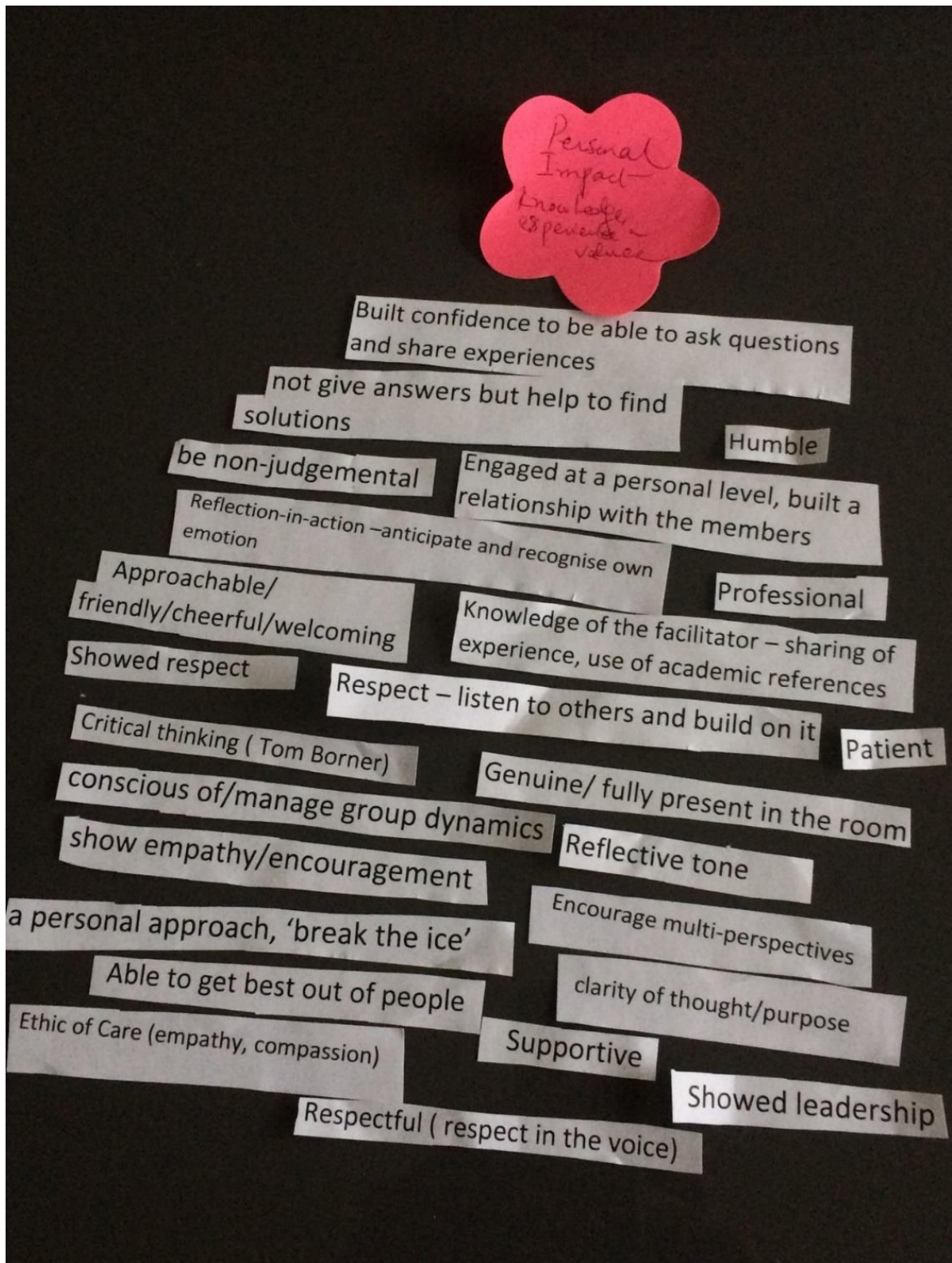


Figure 20. Step 2 – Personal Impact; Knowledge, experience and values.

The third theme ('enable individual and group reflections and learning'), related specifically to individual and collective reflective learning (**Appendix 21**). There was recurring reference to

enabling learning through reflections across the data and although there was some overlap with the above theme on interpersonal skills, I wanted to capture this as a separate theme to understand what echoed with the literature and seek out contradictions, as well as new emerging concepts/ideas. By enabling the ‘self-directed learning’ code within this theme, I was able to link to the generic literature on facilitation, as Heron (1989:17) refers to the facilitator’s ‘subtle art of creating conditions within which people can exercise full self-determination’. I have related the ‘person-centred approach’ code in this theme to Marquardt *et al.*’s (2009) claim that without a AL coach assisting members to focus on what they are achieving, what they are finding difficult and what processes they are using, the implications of these processes would be left to chance and to the accidental or serendipitous application of process skills by group members. I connected the concept of ‘systemic approach’ to enable organised learning to the AL literature which highlights that learning in AL is focused on improving organisational and personal effectiveness through a ‘virtuous learning cycle’ (Edmonstone, 2017). This is also echoed in Rigg’s (2006: 200) observation that the ultimate value ‘is a facilitator who is skilled enough to generate knowledge about the wider organisation or wider system they are working with’. Other codes such as ‘comrades in adversity’ and ‘experimental learning’, relate to learning through experiences, which is rooted in the literature. Interestingly, the ‘enabling sense making’ code can be related to the concept of questioning insight (Revans, 1983; Passfield, 1996) and to O’Neil and Marsick’s (2014) explicit focus on the AL coach’s ability to enable participants to ‘learn how to learn’, but it offers an alternative language or discourse which I have used later to group the final set of constructs, described in section 5.2.5. Parallels drawn with the ‘community of practice’ code, highlight the significance of collective learning.

The fourth and the fifth themes on ‘working with diverse needs, challenges and emotions’ and ‘creating a supportive environment’ related to the literature on group learning (**Appendix 22 and 23**). The emotional and intellectual realities of AL (Vince and Martin, 1993) is addressed in Theme 4 and the codes such as ‘open disclosure’, ‘allowance of emotions’ and ‘contained’ can be related back to the literature on anxiety being an integral part of AL (Vince and Martin, 1993; Vince, 1998; Edmonstone, 2017) and the significance of ‘exchange’, ‘holding’ and ‘containing’ in group learning (Reynold and Trehan, 2003; Thronton, 2016). The two new themes which were apparent here, were ‘being mindful’ and ‘building resilience’. These can be linked back to the programme content as practice of mindfulness was integrated to build resilience.

The codes within the fifth theme on ‘creating a safe environment’, can be related to the literature on facilitation, as both Heron (1999) and Hogan (2000, 2005) refer to the ‘conditions’ for empowerment and learning. The AL literature also confirmed the need for open, trusting and supportive environments (Lamm, 2000; O’Neil and Marsick, 2007; Ednonstone, 2017). Finally, the need for the AL facilitator to apply structures and directives within the AL process in an inclusive way is confirmed in the literature by Marquardt *et al.*, (2009) and Rimanoczy and Turner (2008) who also support the use of an action teaching coach to sensitively and clearly establish the structure, rules and pace of the sessions. A new theme, emerging here as well was ‘providing a space to be mindful and calm’, which I will explore further in section 5.4.

I used the conceptual framework to iterate with the literature on drawing out the themes and relating them to the codes. This step of the thematic analysis, highlighted for me that the voices of the respondents, which I had captured through a simple coding process, inter-related to the literature and the empirical evidence of my research was starting to emerge. I was aware that there were some overlaps within these themes, as the practice of facilitation is a fluid process, but overall the themes related to the key aspects of AL facilitation.

5.2.3 Step 3 - Defining and Naming Themes

The next stage of analysis of this rich dataset was to build a convincing and credible answer to my research inquiry. I spent several days going through the themes and codes again to work out the next step in relating the five themes to the ‘pedagogy of action learning’, my overarching research aim. I decided to return to the literature on ‘pedagogy’ to lead me to my next step. Amidst the contested aspects of the meaning of pedagogy and its differentiation from andragogy, the literature also highlights that pedagogy can be viewed more widely as the art, craft and science of creating an educational process that will develop a dialogical relationship between the educator and the learner, enabling learning and knowledge transfer (Alexander, 2008; Smith and Smith, 2008; Tsabar, 2017). I have been able to relate this to the current interpretation of the practice of action learning, which can be an ethos or a method or a technique (Brook *et al.*, 2012). The emphasis on injecting more criticality into the AL practice (Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Pedler, 2005; O’Neil and Marsick, 2007; Lawless, 2008; Ram and Trehan, 2009), and the need to address and engage with the issue of emotion and politics in action learning (Vince and Martin, 1993; Vince, 2004, 2008), clearly suggests that the

pedagogy of action learning will need to encompass, not just the science of teaching, but also the art and craft required to maximise learning and action of the participants. Thus, as the next stage of assimilating the data, to develop a specific pedagogy for action learning facilitation, I have re-visited the five themes that emerged in Step 2 and reviewed it again, looking at the data specifically through the three lenses of art, craft and science, based on General Teaching Council for England's meaning of pedagogy, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, I have redefined and renamed these three aspects of pedagogy in response to my research context and content. The 'art' of AL facilitation relates to the underpinning commitment and values of the facilitator, which will reflect his/her response to participants. The 'craft' of AL facilitation will encompass the knowledge, skills and experience of the facilitator. As in AL practice, it is the 'apparatus', e.g. structures and systems, rather than the 'science of teaching' that support the facilitation processes; I have adapted the third element to reflect this. Thus, I have approached the pedagogy of AL facilitation as:

- 1) the **commitments and values** that need to underpin the practice; the 'art' of AL facilitation.
- 2) the **knowledge, skills and experiential practice** that are required; the 'craft' of AL facilitation.
- 3) the **processes and structure** to enable AL outcomes; the 'apparatus' of AL facilitation.

I rearranged the codes from the five themes in Step 2 to these three aspects of facilitation. At this stage, I discussed this coding scheme with one of my external advisers who had supported me through the doctoral process of finalising my research proposal. She was familiar with the aim of my research, but was now less-involved in supporting me as she had changed roles and moved to another university. In a detailed conversation with her, I went through a process of articulating my rationale for shifting the focus of my research lens to these three specific themes. Here, she acted as an 'outsider' in querying and challenging this emerging process (Evered and Louis, 1981) and enabled me to ensure that the data was not taken out of context, rather this established that the data was now being viewed specifically to develop a pedagogy of action learning (**Appendix 24**).

5.2.4 Step 4 - Building a Theoretical Framework (What, How, Why)

As the next step of my thematic analysis, I decided to develop a theoretical framework to further drill into the data to establish relationships between the themes and codes and group them to create a clear structure (Whetten, 1989). I have applied three simple elements: “the what”, “the how” and “the why” to build this framework. I have not specifically considered the “who”, “where”, “when” elements within this framework as they are addressed within the context of this research study. I will apply the first building block of the theoretical framework, to determine “what” the AL facilitators need to do. This will address my very early questioning of my own facilitation and what I did to support the learning, change and actions of the AL members. The second building block of the theory development will be to determine “how” the AL facilitators enabled the learning, change and actions of the AL members. The third building block welds the model together to provide logical justification of the purpose of AL facilitation, i.e. “why” facilitate the AL sessions? Therefore, in building my theoretical model I have considered:

“WHY” facilitate AL?

“WHAT” the facilitators need to do?

“HOW” they can facilitate? (See **Appendix 25**)

5.2.5 Step 5 – Developing a Model of Pedagogy of AL Facilitation (Apply What, How, Why to the Purpose of AL Facilitation)

In the last step of my thematic analysis, using my ‘W’ framework (What, What and HoW), I collapsed and refined the long list of codes to develop a set of ‘constructs’ of each element of this framework. I have been able to do this because I went through the iterative process of familiarising myself with the dataset in Steps 1 and 2. Gadamer (2008), who reconceptualised the hermeneutic circle, refers to this iterative process through which a new understanding of a whole reality is developed. This exploration of the data has enabled me to identify a set of constructs, which represents my final interpretation and new understanding of the pedagogy of AL facilitation. The constructs of AL facilitation are as follows:

“WHY” facilitate AL to enable Reflexivity, Inquiry and Advocacy.

“WHAT” the facilitators need to do: Facilitating intra and inter dialogue, sense-making for facilitator and participants, raise self and others awareness and generate possibilities.

“HOW” they can facilitate: Facilitator’s use of self, developing relationships/building trust and provide conditions for learning (**Appendix 26**).

5.3 Findings – The Art, Craft and Apparatus of AL Facilitation

In this section, I have presented the findings, viewed specifically under the research lens of the commitment and values, that underpin the AL facilitator’s practice (the art of AL facilitation), the skills and knowledge of the AL facilitator (the craft of AL facilitation) and the processes and structures that support AL facilitation (the apparatus of AL facilitation).

5.3.1 The Art of AL Facilitation - The Commitments and Values the Underpin the AL Practice

The responses from the AL members illustrate that their experience of AL facilitation was that the facilitators were committed to supporting them and the learning process within the AL sessions. AL facilitators have also confirmed the importance of being fully engaged and committed to facilitating the learning within the groups.

The findings highlight that the ‘art’ of AL facilitation requires the facilitator to be approachable, calm, relaxed and supportive, as well as flexible to respond to the needs of the AL members. The values underpinning the role of facilitation were respect, empathy and empowerment, along with the need to be non-judgemental and self-regularity.

Approach and Commitments of AL Facilitation

The AL member responses help to build a picture of an approachable and friendly facilitator, who shows patience and self-effacing behaviour to avoid power dynamics and create neutrality. Furthermore that facilitator should be able to demonstrate genuine commitment to supporting and enabling the group to engage in a reflective inquiry process. This is evident from the comments below:

'I found her approachable, I found her genuine, I found her humble which allowed me to be relaxed, feel comfortable and confident'(AL member 2).

'Her style was open....she was very happy and cheerful which was very important actually...She was very engaging and she made us feel at ease. She appeared to be passionate about what she was doing and loyal to the cause, that she was really serious about it, she was fully present in the room... ' (AL member 3).

Here 'being fully present' appears to relate not only to the facilitator's commitment to the AL process, but also active listening skills, avoidance of distractions, as well as the practice of being in the present through mindfulness practice. Thus, the practice of AL reflects an overlap between the 'art' and 'craft' of AL facilitation.

The importance of being able to put the AL members at ease was also highlighted by several AL members. This seems to be about the AL facilitator's commitment to creating attunement; bringing harmony and a feeling of being "at one" with another. The AL members expressed this in different ways.

'Her approach was open, relaxed and calm because anxiety can be transferred very easily...' (AL member 4).

'She was not an overpowering person, you felt at ease with her, felt quite comfortable' (AL member 5).

'She engaged the whole group, very calming presence and very supporting' (AL member 7).

'She was relaxed, welcoming...asked open style and follow up questions, reflective tone throughout, made it easy for people to speak, also the confidentiality helped' (AL member 9).

'She made me feel comfortable, her style of asking open questions...digging a bit deeper, she gave us the confidence and enabled to ask questions and share experience which we may not have elsewhere' (AL member 10).

'She was very relaxed. We checked in and she created a relaxed space' (AL member 13).

'She actually broke the ice and she helped with a lot of things we were talking about. She was open to what we wanted to discuss' (AL member 14).

The 'art' of being able to offer this supportive, calming space can be attributed to *'no conflict or difference of opinion...people were sympathetic to what others were saying... the calmness of it all made the process a lot easier...'* (AL member 9). The group members felt that they were not only allowed, but encouraged to be themselves. This is supported by the observation of one of the AL members:

'I did not feel awkward, or that I could not say something or talk about my experiences... in my opinion the AL sets were probably the most helpful, I learnt a lot more because of the intimate setting, and for me it felt better' (AL member 10).

The commitment of the AL facilitator to *'work with what is in the room'* (AL facilitator 1) was noticed and valued by the AL members: *'she adopted her style to the needs of the individual'* (AL member 8).

Values of AL Facilitation

The core values, which surfaced from the responses are: respect, empathy and empowerment. The emphasis on respect came from the AL members, as well as the facilitators. The 'Chatham House rules' set out at the start of these sessions helped to embed this: *'the ground rules were set in the beginning that it is about respecting each other so that in itself was probably enough for our group'* (AL member 5). Some AL members highlighted the evidence of respect as follows:

'So there were times when someone who [would] say I am not so sure about this, have you tried this, I don't agree with that, we did not always agree but we respected each other. So it turned into a very supportive environment which was actually led by the

facilitator. The facilitator was saying, “Let’s think about it as a group, does anyone have an idea about this?”, and helped us to get together’ (AL member 1).

‘There was respect...There was lot of encouragement [by the facilitator], there was one member who found mindfulness difficult...I felt this was done [by the facilitator] in a very gentle, respectful way...there was respect in the voice and acknowledgment... We felt listened to. It was a therapeutic space where we could be ourselves’ (AL member 6).

One of the AL facilitators summed up what respect meant in practice:

‘listen to people, thank them for their contribution, build on what they said, the skill of a facilitator is not to kick it on the grass but to take a minute or so to follow up e.g.what triggered that...can you help us understand...help us to be reflective ...’ (AL facilitator 1).

The importance of ‘*just being there...being supportive, showing empathy*’ has been referred to several times by the AL facilitators to address the participants’ feelings and emotions. One of the AL facilitators remembers, ‘*I felt myself ...feeling more nurturing of her...and I just noticed that in myself, but they [other AL members] were very caring towards her...*’ (AL facilitator 3). The impact of empathy, warmth and support shown by the AL facilitators was also evident in the AL members’ responses.

‘She showed emotional maturity. There was rapt attention from her, unspoken empathy, good eye contact, stretch of hand, in support...’ (AL member 12).

‘The word that come to mind is empathy, even from my peers there was definitely empathy. There was also courage, sometimes it was a bit emotional and there was encouragement to think in a different way...our facilitator helped to reflect and if something was said that was a bit harsh she will reframe it...I felt safe, there was a safe space to be our self, be honest and there was no judgement, there was no criticism’ (AL member 6).

This aspect of being non-judgemental and self-regulatory was also addressed by one of the AL facilitator who recalled:

'I role model some of the skills and behaviours ,as a AL facilitator, which I hope they will adopt, it requires to have strong understanding and self-control, self-regulation during the course of the AL session so that I can facilitate their thinking and development' (AL facilitator 1).

This demonstrates a high level of self-awareness as well as being fully aware of 'others-awareness' that is, being alert to others in the AL sets.

The 'art' of being able to encourage the AL members to be '*able to be me*' was clearly articulated, '*...she developed relationship with each one of us, she was very patient and she allowed us to engage and discuss...she empowers us*' (AL member 11). Here, 'empowering' appears to be less about giving the authority or power to do something, but more about encouraging and building confidence to engage fully in the AL process. This is the person-centred approach referred to by one of the AL facilitators who highlighted the importance of '*ethic of care...giving people choice and letting people know...so with this there is confidentiality especially around disclosure, that they can bring want they want to...*' (AL facilitator 2). Another facilitator also talked about '*Ethics of care...offering anonymity, confidentiality, support and care, keeping them safe in the space. The overriding driver was psychological safety and wellbeing*' (AL facilitator 3). There was acknowledgement of this by the AL members, '*She was empathetic to my situation, I felt reassured...and supported*' (AL member 12). Empowering an AL member to accept and work with emotions is described as: '*One participant was very emotional, the approach was allowing the emotion to be expressed...I was encouraged to reflect on situation...she was signposted and given encouragement...*' (AL member 8).

Creating the opportunity to share individual perspectives and acknowledge diversity in the group was also identified as a core facilitation value. One of the AL facilitators expressed this as '*people will see things differently, people have different ideas and people's experiences are valuable...trying to get this across to the group...is important*' (AL facilitator 2). Thus, leading in the right direction taking this into consideration was key, as expressed by more than one AL member:

‘She was there to support us, not give us suggestions but lead and direct...’ (AL member 4).

‘We could be honest and open which was a big help...she encouraged openness as well our views, she followed a structure but was not rigid’ (AL member 10).

The importance of being professional as an AL facilitator was discussed in the reflective group gatherings. The need to *‘set a scene of respect, of learning and reflection...’*, *‘to give an image of competence in whatever I do...whatever I say’* and *‘being present and competent, aware of interpersonal relationships in the learning group’* were some of the comments made by the facilitators. In discussing specific examples of AL issues raised and how these were facilitated by each of the facilitators, there was agreement that *‘trusting [your] own professional judgement is very important, that’s why we’ve been put in there, [because] we are professionals...’*.

Finally, a review of my own reflective notes shows that my own values and commitment are aligned to facilitating the learning of each member of the group by encouraging them to be the focus point of the learning process. I have recorded this: *‘I try my best to always think about the individual, step into their shoes, share their problem, but at the same time stay outside of it, so I can facilitate the learning process...’*.

Overall, these findings suggest that the ‘art’ of AL facilitation is to use one’s personal self including one’s personality traits, belief systems, life experience and cultural heritage (Dewane, 2006), to engage and build relationships with the AL members. This is realised by showing respect, acknowledgement and attunement through emotional sensing and connecting, as well as encouraging and empowering the AL members to participate in a reflective inquiry to promote learning and action. This is supported by the literature on facilitation, which highlights that having a caring, empathic and genuine manner with a flexible approach, and respect of individuals ‘to choose when to change and grow’ (Heron, 1999: 340), supports the learning of participants in an experimental learning group. This can also be related to Carl Rogers’ concept of ‘congruence’, which he describes as being ‘genuine and without "front" or façade’ and the warm, positive, acceptant attitude which he refers to as ‘unconditional positive regard’; a positive feeling without reservation and making judgment (Rogers, 1962:416). These findings also related to the International Association of Facilitators’ (IAF) competencies

on creating a collaborative relationship, recognising diversity, ensuring inclusivity and acting with integrity, neutrality and professionalism. The AL literature confirms these key qualities required by the AL facilitator as tolerance of ambiguity, openness, frankness, patience and empathy, which are some of the key qualities required by the facilitator (Edmonstone, 2017). This centrality of the relationship, to maintain trust and build respect, is considered to be of primary importance across developmental interventions, such as coaching and AL (Vaartjes, 2005). In the context of my research, mindfulness practice within the group, providing confidentiality and creating a space for open disclosure appears to have provided the opportunity to bind the AL members with the AL facilitator, positively impacting on the power dynamic in the group to build this trust, mutual respect and acceptance.

5.3.2 The Craft of AL Facilitation - The Knowledge, Skills and Experiential Practice of the AL Facilitator

The analysis of interview responses of both the AL members and the AL facilitators throw light on the ‘craft’ of AL facilitation. The essential skills, knowledge and understanding required in effective facilitation within the AL context were clearly articulated by the participants. These responses match with the post graduate programme evaluation and my own reflective notes, as well as the GRG records, which strengthening the validity of the findings. The knowledge and experience of the AL facilitator was mainly identified during the interview process. The range of knowledge and application of models included the importance of ‘building rapport and clarity of purpose’ (coach/mentoring model), organising reflection, ‘experiential learning including acknowledgement of emotional domain and political context’, team dynamics, using dialogue to make meaning, sense making and individual and organisational learning theories. This knowledge was demonstrated in practice and confirmed by the AL members. The overarching ‘craft’ of the AL facilitation, identified through the coding process, are shown by: asking insightful questions (including prompting, rephrasing, summarising, probing), active listening, providing constructive feedback, raising self-awareness, providing guidance and advise when required, enabling thinking and reflection, ‘contain’ situations and emotions and recognising group dynamics.

Asking Insightful Questioning

The findings suggest that questioning was the primary medium of exchange within the action learning sets. The AL facilitators' craft of asking questions was clear from the AL members' responses:

'She asked open ended questions, sometimes directive but in an open way, if that makes sense. They were particular questions, not just yes and no answers, for example: what would you find helpful? How do you think you can overcome this barrier? Helping us to think about particular barriers, how we can break them down? Like I said earlier helping us to reflect. Open ended questions was definitely her style' (AL member 1).

'She asks you questions and the answers come from you, or you ask the question and then you find the answers while you are asking the questions; it channelled you to stay focused on what you are thinking' (AL member 11).

'She asked insightful questions about the issues raised, which helped to understand and discuss the situation further' (AL member 12).

'She participated in questioning herself, encouraging people to clarify a question. For me, she role modelled the way of asking questions and exploring issues' (AL member 5).

Some of the AL members referred specifically to probing, prompting, summarising and rephrasing by the AL facilitator to explore issues raised in their sessions.

'Questions would be asked, she also prompted and help us remember what we needed to discuss and put us in the right direction. It was quite good – the way she prompted us with questions and gave us the space to think' (AL member 14).

'Also, she identified themes that were coming back from each person, summarising what was said' (AL member 13).

'She highlighted the main points...we sometimes say things, but we do not give enough significance to certain words...she just brings them back, repeating and rephrasing...'
(AL member 8).

The AL facilitators also talked about the skill of questioning; one provided some specific examples in one of the group reflective gathering sessions, *'I did try and be supportive in questions like: What are your expectations? What do you need, what would having control look like? Where do you get your energy? How does this make you feel? What do you think happened? What could have contributed to this?'* (AL facilitator 2). Another AL facilitator elaborated on the range of techniques applied: *'prompting where necessary, clarifying, summarising, paraphrasing, different styles of questioning in a critical way to make sense of their problem'* (AL facilitator 3).

In my own reflective notes, I have referred to questioning and summarising to enable AL members to clarify and make sense of their situations. On some occasions, I *'encouraged open discussion...asking questions such as 'Is this something you can consider? How do you feel about this now?'* On another instance, in exploring one AL member's challenge, as the conversation was becoming repetitive and not getting anywhere, *'I came forward in my chair, offering an indication to be more directly involved in the questioning and I asked questions such as: How do you feel about your manager? What advice would you give me if I was in your situation?'* I have also recorded, *'rephrasing, summarising key points made'* to encourage AL members to gather their thoughts and make sense of the situation. Another example of summarising from my reflective notes:

DH talked about her current line manager and workload, changes in her role, lack of appraisal targets and her disappointment in not being successful in a couple of internal promotion applications. I observed that the AL members asked a few clarifying questions during this time but...her story was flowing out, moving from one aspect of her concern to another. In aiming to manage the process, on this occasion, I offered to summarise in an attempt to bring clarity to the context. I suggested that as I saw it there were two key areas for consideration...

Here, my self-reflective inquiry and social validation, through the group reflective gathering process and participants' responses, has enabled me to establish one of my living theories of

facilitation of AL, as advocated by Whitehead and McNiff (2006). My living theory is that finding the right question to ask at the right time is an essential facilitation skill within the AL process. Questioning that focuses on examining underlying causes and long-range solutions seeks to provide the greatest leverage (Marquardt, 1999, 2004). These questions can help to structure the conversations, facilitate reflections to improve thinking and promote learning and change (Revans, 1980; Marsick and O'Neil, 1999).

Active Listening and Giving Feedback

Active listening was identified as an essential skill within the AL process by both the AL members and the AL facilitators. AL members confirmed that the AL facilitators were '*good listeners*' and '*showed that they was really interested...through lot of eye contact, rephrasing what you are saying...active listening...*' (AL members 4, 11, 12, 6).

The attention, required to listen actively, was also raised in the group reflective gatherings. One of the AL facilitator reflected on this:

'You're trying very hard to listen actively, but most importantly, well, you know, to know how they're feeling...to actually know what's going on, you know, the actual thing that they're talking about is not that clear sometimes...' (AL facilitator 3).

One of the AL facilitators, offered an interesting analogy in response to the following interview question 'If someone came into the room, what they would see you doing?' She responded, as follows:

'They would see me listening, they see me...part of the role is like a midwife, you sit with someone and help them tell their story...you help them to let them find the words to tell their story, as part of this is inquiry' (AL facilitator 2).

I have also referred to actively listening within my AL set in my reflective notes, '*I found myself listening actively and did not feel the need to ask questions myself, as I saw that there was great expertise on the subject in the room...*' Sometimes, when the group was fully

engaged and probing questions were being asked, I ‘mainly *facilitated the process by listening and ensuring that everyone was included*’. On another occasion, I recorded:

CD [another manager] had concerns over one of her team members. Initial discussions confirmed that this was a challenging situation and that the manager was doing everything right so far. Two of the action learning members had lots of expertise in this area; some excellent ‘advocacy’ was offered which gave her 2/3 other avenues to consider. I managed the process by listening and encouraging open discussion...

Closely related to active listening is providing feedback, as this demonstrates the attention of the listener, as well as helps to review the situation and consider possibilities and options. This is confirmed by more than one AL member:

‘She was giving me feedback on what I was saying, highlighting the main points... She was listening and taking notes. She was asking reflective questions, but mainly she was listening...she also calmed the person down and helped her consider other possibilities’ (AL member 7).

‘The facilitator really supported us in whatever we were going through and she gave us good and positive feedback. And I find it very, very helpful. The facilitator really supported us, gave us good, positive and constructive feedback’ (AL member 14).

‘She directed our learning, but allowed us to lead the talking, she gave us feedback. She helped us through discussion of our challenges which raised my self-awareness’ (AL member 11).

Another AL member compared the AL facilitator’s style to a coach, who, through listening and questioning, encouraged the AL members to consider options for action.

‘She had a coaching style, it is helping people to come to their own answers and not coming in and saying here is the answer. Asking questions, encouraging them to think what their options are, where they are now, where they want to go, that kind of encouragement’ (AL member 5).

In my own reflective notes, I have also referred to encouraging my AL members to '*consider options/ideas from the AL processes*'. I recorded this clearly on one instance below:

I suggested that she put herself in the centre of her project and then re-valuate the outcomes she wants. This helped her to consider her own development ...and how this may impact on options/opportunities for extending her practice. AG was able to consider her options and reframe her objectives accordingly.

Thus, the above findings confirm that active listening as a key communication skill, which is essential in other group development activities such as team coaching (Wageman *et al.*, 2008), is also an important element within the AL process. The AL process requires giving undivided attention to the person speaking, acknowledging the message and using body language and gestures to convey attention. Responding appropriately and providing constructive feedback enables AL members to reframe issues and consider options. This raises their self-awareness and confirms that our 'non-symbolic, non-verbal, procedural awareness' as implicit knowing enables us to 'feel it in our body and sense it in our minds, together.' (Stern, 2004: 76) and that groups are particularly good at bringing these unnoticed aspects of knowledge into the conscious realm, because the multiple perspectives of the individual members 'amplify' the communication and act as a reality check on each other (Thornton, 2016).

Enable Thinking and Reflection

Enabling thinking and reflection was another key theme which emerged from the data. The responses show that the reflective process was intrinsically bound to questioning as it is often guided by good questions (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007). This was confirmed by one of the AL members: '*She facilitates us to think and reflect on certain issues that may have come up and asks a lot of open-ended questions, very much geared towards helping us to reflect on certain issues which may come up, such as work issues*' (AL member 1). This emphasis on enabling thinking and reflection was a recurring feature within the AL member interview responses, including the facilitation of both individual and collective reflective process within the AL sessions:

'She would support and she was doing a lot of reflective structure, she was kind of containing...containing within the context, what I really liked is there was room for

careful reflection. A space people could share, so in that sense she was facilitating...both self-reflection and collective reflection' (AL member 6).

'It was a personal kind of approach...encouraging us to think about ourselves, giving us the permission to think about...how I look after myself, how I manage myself, that was very much part of our discussion' (AL member 8).

'She encouraged us to reflect a bit further, she also reminded others that it is not about giving solutions, but it is about helping someone to reflect on their own issues...' (AL member 5).

'It helped my mind to focus, I was going through some problems, I did not think of it in that way, she made me think of it; she provided a platform for me to air, voice what was going on with me and others in the group' (AL member 2).

'Reflection comes into it, reflective questions were asked to let you think. Reflect on ...how did I come across?...but could I have done this differently? She asked a lot of reflective question to let you think' (AL member 7).

The AL facilitators also talked about the skills of enabling reflection and inquiry to encourage dialogue and sense making:

'The aim is to encourage dialogue – [through] active listening, reflection and inquiry so each can get a better understanding of the challenges they are facing, generate widening options and then finally, sense making and an increase in the clarity of thoughts will enable them to release energy and focus things more clearly on their own performance' (AL facilitator 1).

'The aim is to go in with a mind-set to creating and holding an environment in which people feel safe and there is a space to think and reflect' (AL facilitator 2).

'Enable them to share learning and assist with problem solving of issues occurring at work...aim to aid their learning in a critical way...to situate their learning in

theoretical views, contextualising more widely...I was helping them to make sense, so sense making was an important element' (AL facilitator 3).

It was observed within the group reflective gatherings, that through the 'craft' of 'sense making', the AL facilitators were able to enhance '*situational awareness and enable AL members to begin to unpack complex situations, to make connections and act effectively. This required content knowledge, context understanding and the skills and experience to weave together the multi-perspectives of the situation through active listening and feedback*'. Some started to shape their identity as a manager through the AL conversations.

'An AL member who was initially in a place of non-learning was able to make sense of what was going on for her as she allowed herself to reframe the situation and consider other aspects influencing the situation, which she had not considered before' (AL facilitator 4).

'Because they had made sense of the stories they were sharing in the learning set and that in itself was helping them begin to position and identify what it means for them' (AL facilitator 1).

'It's helping them to position themselves, where they are, so that reshaping is happening because they are in a space where they can relate theory to practice, they don't just have to be in a session with this topic covered and go away and then be a manager and then come back and do another session and then do the assignment...in the action learning set they're having the space to shape themselves as lead managers... so all of them are making sense, linking theory to practice' (AL facilitator 4).

In my own notes I reflected on the significance of trust in relation to critical reflection, '*I had felt that the members had established trust in the group to be able to help [each other] to critically reflect on their thoughts and feelings*'. I also recorded how I encouraged thinking to enhance clarification of thinking for one member:

DH [the AL member] realises that she is very demotivated at the moment... I asked her what she knows now, that she had not considered previously...the air space was used to help her to take a step back to enable her to think through the overall aim of her

project and objectives for the organisation and also for her own development. She has realised that it is important to be positive; her awareness of things around her has increased, she said she is more observant.

Thus, sense making was taking place at two levels, I was making sense of situations presented and simultaneously enabling sense making within the AL set. Within group reflective gathering there was also unanimous agreement that our role as facilitators was to organise reflections of the AL members. Here, our role in helping the AL members to make sense of the issues raised was evident:

'I found it remarkably easy, actually, to invite them to reflect on what they were grappling with in their work...I think in the first instance, I could see that I and the other participants were trying to listen very carefully to our first presenter and what worked really well, actually, was that the other participants asked some very good questions, which helped...her think about how she might be framing stuff and indeed, perhaps challenged her to think [reframe] about..., for example, what [the situation] might look like...' (AL facilitator 2).

'Our job, in an action learning set, is that we organise reflection, so that it's not just the individuals, but together as a group they are learning and it's a different process' (AL facilitator 1).

The positive impact of this reflective process within the AL sessions were reiterated in the focus group session and summative programme evaluation questionnaire. Participant comments included: *'a safe space to think and reflect on leadership practices', 'able to think differently about situations at work, reflect and generate solutions', 'listening, reflection and better understand of complex work situations', learnt to think differently, 'the space for reflection was valuable and rare; a very supportive process' and 'provided direction and encouraged thinking, developed/enhanced active listening skills, reflection-on-action'.*

Here again, I have established another of my living theories (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) of AL facilitation through the self-reflective inquiry and social validation of the group reflective gathering process, participants' responses and programme evaluation. My living theory established that each member was encouraged by the comments and questions of their peers

and the facilitator, to reflect and think, make connections and consider new possibilities (Marquardt 1999). This process of clarifying one's thinking can enable AL members to begin to 'think about their thinking' (Sanyal, 2017). This relates to the metacognition process (Flavell, 1979), which encompasses the processes of planning, tracking and assessing one's own understanding or performance. Thus, reflection is undoubtedly an integral part of how learning happens in AL (Boud *et al.*, 1996; Dilworth and Wills, 2003; Pedler *et al.*, 2005; O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; Leonard, 2015).

Working with Emotions

As there are aspects of individual experience of learning that are filtered through emotional, psychological history and conditioned by broader forces of power within an organisation (Vince and Martin, 1993), I was keen to explore how emotions were managed within the AL process, specifically by the AL facilitator. This was addressed in the interviews with the AL members and the AL facilitators. The findings confirm the support provided by the AL facilitators to manage emotions and address difficult conversations raised within the AL sessions. This recognition of emotions and feelings within the AL sessions was evident in the programme evaluation from comments, such as; '*I felt listened to*', '*open, non-judgemental space to talk*', '*able to open up*' and '*a more human process*'. A more detailed insight and experience was collated through analysis of the interview responses.

The AL members identified a range of techniques applied: '*keeping the focus*' by '*being in control of the discussion... otherwise we could deviate*' (AL member 2); being '*able to look at [things] objectively, but with warmth in it*' (AL member 3); being '*very supportive and validate the feelings and facts, to acknowledge how difficult that situation must be*' (AL member 5); '*listening, that was the main thing, also questions such as what else can you consider? What are your options now?*' (AL member 9) and '*who [facilitator] in a why is quite conscious of group dynamics and in a subtle way, would steer without being intrusive*' (AL member 8).

There were also specific examples/instances shared by the AL members during the interviews which throw further light on this 'craft' of the AL facilitator:

'I was quite emotional, but not in the sense that I was teary or anything, but more angry. She would keep it quite containing, she would be able to contain these emotions, feelings and help me to rationalise... What would help? What can you do? How can this be overcome? So I would say she was quite supportive and would get me to think and reflect as well as would contain these emotions' (AL member 1).

'One participant was very emotional, the approach was to allow the emotion to be expressed and also to give advice, where to go for support. Also, in the group, we were able to comfort the person and give advice and maybe reflect on our situation...She was signposting and giving encouragement' (AL member 8).

'The facilitator calmed [her] down,...get the person to understand...it is still your ideas... think about the best way...so needed to listen, observe and prompt...what you would do in that situation...how you would manage it...we also prompt each other as well. Not telling them what to do, but kind of being supportive and this is very important ...to listen and prompt...' (AL member 4).

'The word that comes to mind is empathy...There was also courage, sometimes it was a bit emotional and there was encouragement to think in a different way...our facilitator helped to reflect and if something was said that was a bit harsh she will reframe it...I felt safe, there was a safe space to be our self and be honest and there was no judgement, there was no criticism' (AL member 6).

'It was very honest, very open, we realised that we had a lot in common with instances that had happened with members of staff...the way it was facilitated helped me to be honest. The facilitator listened, but also pulled people back if they veered off... We know that what we said would be confidential, it would not go any further and no names were mentioned. The scenarios were all relevant, the feedback was very good and it always helped to know that others have similar issues to you' (AL member 10).

'During the mindfulness exercise, there was a lot of emotions...she helped us to reflect ...I reflected at a personal level and I felt a lot of emotions. It helped me to make a decision from it' (AL member 11).

'She made the person feel safe. It was contained very well. The feeling was that it was safe to talk about it and it did not feel uncomfortable. When I discussed my 'issue' she was able to relate to it, reflect back what you said, I felt listened to and also she got you to think about it to, it was not about telling a story but reflecting and being critical'. (AL member 13).

'When I was talking about it...I was emotional. After I brought this up and discussed it with the group I felt less emotional; I felt supported by the facilitator and the group. After talking about it I was reassured...it was helpful to talk about it, was a safe space for this...' (AL member 14).

This demonstrates that the AL facilitators recognised and 'contained' the emotions within the AL sets and were able to offer appropriate guidance and support to enhance the learning and outcomes for the AL members. AL facilitators' interview responses to addressing the participant's feelings/emotions during the sessions, showed that they were able to balance the support required for the individual, as well as keep the others in the room engaged by remaining neutral, and at the same time demonstrating empathy and acknowledgement of the situation. One of the facilitators shared the following: *'there can be a danger for the facilitator to try to solve the problem, this is a pitfall that the facilitator needs to avoid, and here showing emotional intelligence is required'* (AL facilitator 1). Another facilitator talked about *'the along sidedness, just being there, being supportive, provide a contained space, this was a duty of care'* (AL facilitator 2). The importance of acknowledgement is further highlighted by another AL facilitator which again strongly echo's Carl Rogers' (1962) positive unconditional regard of acceptance and being non-judgemental:

'Important not to be dismissive, to be non-judgemental, actively listening, paraphrasing, summarising, enable person to feel clearer to making decisions, the space created to be bring emotions, certainly not to stop it... person needs to be heard, intensified my listening,...I created more space for them, active listening, contextualising the issue and help to consider the options...more focus on the person...more direct intervention' (AL facilitator 3).

Within the group reflective gatherings, key aspects of creating the 'place of safety' to allow, support and manage emotions was discussed. The importance of *'noticing, being present and*

in the moment and feeding back to reinforcing message', 'managing the action learning set container', 'the mindfulness practice', 'the trust and relational process which had been developed' and 'being alive to what's going on in your own head' were highlighted as good practice within the group reflective gatherings.

The AL facilitators were asked a specific question on how they dealt with their feelings /emotions during the AL sessions. Here are their responses:

'That is a balancing act...a good night sleep to think clearly and make better decisions. I anticipate these AL sessions to be physically and psychologically demanding and I have to maintain my posture, facial expression, eye contact and think clearly as well. Preparation in advance, in the moment I have developed enough of a repertoire or skill set to anticipate and recognise feeling and emotions... share my own anecdotes, I need to honour those stories, treat them with respect, share them, but...not hijack' (AL facilitator 1).

'Reflection-in action, paying attention to my gut, body, feelings, perhaps even naming it. I may call a break...being mindful of what is my stuff and what is their stuff, while I am quite open to sharing, in care there is reciprocity, sharing a snippet but not off-loading everything...avoid projection' (AL facilitator 2).

'Valued our supportive structure around these sessions, acknowledgement of supervision and off-loading, taking notes, mental preparation before and after, I used reflections to manage my emotions which really helped' (AL facilitator 3).

These responses show that the AL facilitator prepared, both physically and mentally, to be able to recognise and work with emotions within the AL sets. It was also evident that they had developed the skills for this. The importance of the group reflective gathering was seen as a helpful vehicle for 'off-loading'. This element of 'supervision' for AL practice will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

Therefore, in managing the emotions, it is evident the art and craft of AL facilitation emerged together as the genuine concern of the AL facilitator and support offered through 'holding' and 'containing' contributed to building trust and eliminating defensiveness. Thus, the AL

facilitator appears to have achieved attunement by going beyond being empathic to creating a feeling of emotional connectedness within the AL set. This demonstrates the AL facilitator's awareness of behaviours and psychological processes within the groups (Lewin, 1947; Bion, 1961, Bales, 1970; McLeish *et al.*, 1973; Jaques 1984) and the ability to take into account emotional, intellectual, non-verbal, content and context of individuals' engaged in group interaction. The facilitators' understanding of such aspects of group dynamics (Bion, 1961) enabled them to offer the 'holding' and 'containing' required (Thornton, 2016) to help and empower individuals, leading to 'insight or increased authority' (Vince and Martin, 1993).

Recognising Differences

As the review of the literature highlighted, that it is essential to consider and recognise differences in groups rather than just manage them (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003), both the AL members and the facilitators were asked during the interviews to consider how differences were addressed within the AL sets. The overall responses from the AL members' illustrate that the three AL sets were harmonious groups, supported by the AL facilitators. This was expressed as follows:

'It was not about conflict, it was more about a supportive environment. The main thing was listening, listening to each other and she encouraged that listening' (AL member 2).

'It was just fluid, there was harmony in it...so there is an aspect of listening and learning. So there was no real direct conflict as such...there was no solution, it was just suggestion's (AL member 3).

'There was harmony in the group. There was time people would say something and others would think about it and add and move on, so more like acceptance of each other's views' (AL member 13).

'People felt that they could express their thoughts and if they were not the same that was fine. I can't think of a difficult situation that had to be managed. The ground rules

were set in the beginning that it is about respecting each other so that in itself was probably enough for our group' (AL member 5).

'Very supportive, calming atmosphere, there was no conflict or difference of opinion. People were sympathetic to what others were saying. The calmness of it all made the process a lot easier...' (AL member 9).

However, there was some reference to ensuring equal participation and engagement by the facilitators within the AL sets. One of them commented that the facilitator *'moderated the ones who had a bigger voice in the room...the setup, structure helped with this'* (AL member 12).

Another made a similar reference: *'If someone was over talking, she might say we have to hear what you have to say, let's hear from another person....some clear direction'* (AL member 4).

Other examples offered were:

'On some occasions we could not follow what the person was trying to say so the facilitator would be rephrasing certain things or asking questions...there were differences in opinion but it was facilitated in a non-judgemental way to express our views and we felt that our views were valued' (AL member 8).

'She was very good that she put all that into context, giving people the opportunity to speak, not speak over them, she was very mindful that the time is distributed equally. Some people are more vocal than others and the facilitator is aware of that and so she capped others so everyone could have a chance, she engaged everybody' (AL member 11).

The AL facilitators' responses demonstrated their awareness of acknowledging differences, applying the AL processes to manage these as appropriate, but at the same time work with what is emergent, being non-judgemental and valuing contributions. This is reflected in the comments below:

'There are protocols and ground rules to manage differences...if it happened it will be important to acknowledge, resist temptation to ignore it, or force conversations back on to acceptance path' (AL facilitator 1).

'One of the great things about an AL session is that you get multi-perspectives. I am focusing on the person, in a collective way, I tend to work with what is emerging... fairness/equally in treating people and being valued' (AL facilitator 2).

'Being non-judgemental, help people to feel their contribution is valued, some people clearly wanted more air time but it was to sensitivity manage that, leaning forward... not losing that care for them. Brain has to work over time to think what I need to do next...Setting up the room was important to me, creating the space was important to me, welcome them, allowing them to chat amongst themselves, manage the time better, equal air space, able to sit back, creating the caring space' (AL facilitator 3).

The responses of the AL members and AL facilitators clearly demonstrate that in facilitation of groups, rather than 'bracketing' differences so that communication can be untainted by them, it needs to be recognised, acknowledged, understood, and confronted and deconstructed as appropriate (Giroux, 1988, 1992; Ellsworth, 1989; Weiler, 1991).

An observation on differences, which emerged from the analysis of the group reflective gatherings, appears to be an under-reported dimension in many studies; not everyone was at the same threshold for their readiness to learn. Also, as facilitators we considered the possibility that, for some, there may only be surface learning or no learning at all. This was expressed in different ways:

'I don't think she was quite ready, I think she needed to be heard and she needed someone to understand her from her point of view' (AL facilitator 3).

'I think initially she didn't find it easy and I think it took quite a bit of feedback from the group and myself to enable her to acknowledge how much work she had done, because she knew she'd done a good job and this theme of not being recognised and valued for your contributions came up...she seemed to be struggling then with how she was going to position herself going forward, so there was a fear and an anxiety moving forward...' (AL facilitator 2).

'This question of readiness to learn is an important consideration for the facilitator...how we help them to shift from just describing the story, to thinking much

more reflectively and reflexively about what it is they're doing and what is in the nature of the problems that they're presenting' (AL facilitator 1).

These comments reflect understanding and acknowledgment that individual's experiences of learning are affected by emotions and personal situations.

Providing Guidance/Advice

Another theme which emerged from the data was on providing guidance and advice to support and enable the AL members to express their views and concerns, ensure access to relevant information and services, exercise their rights and responsibilities and explore choices and options. The participants' comments clearly acknowledge this supportive process: *'she was observing us and seeing what issues we have and she guided us...promoted us (AL member 4), 'she would listen and give advice but it was not just her, it was others in the group as well, they shared their difficulties so it helped' (AL member 7), 'she was able to guide, give advice and listen to what people were saying...it made it quite informal and which I looked forward to going to' (AL member 9).* This was clearly about supporting and enabling people to express their views and concerns and not about telling people what to do.

'She was guiding us when we got stuck, allowing us to explore the issues, but also contributing, but not in an intrusive way, but in a participating, equal way...she will give us some gentle advice or prompts...about certain issues' (AL member 8).

I have also reflected on how I encouraged each member to put forward their plan of action and make their thinking and reasons explicit. I noted this process in my reflective notes: *'two of the action learning members had lots of expertise in this area; some excellent 'advocacy' was offered which gave her 2/3 other avenues to consider. I managed the process by listening, encouraging and prompting'.* The AL members were encouraged to ask, rather than tell and if and when personal insights/examples are shared this is done in agreement with the group.

In the group reflective gatherings, one AL facilitator shared an example of when the issue was complex, the AL members had exhausted their questioning and the AL member appeared to be stuck, it became necessary to offer some guidance to move conversations forward:

'I think that instinct comes from a place of professionalism, but it's not necessarily to say that you shouldn't do it in an action learning context because you are there. I suppose it boils down to, are you there as a facilitator? To remain silent and somewhat detached and peripheral, or are you there actively listening? and I suppose it's our role to do both' (AL facilitator 2).

This instinct appears to be more than just a gut feeling; rather, it is informed intuition based on paying deep attention and cognitive thinking, which reflects the knowledge and experience of the AL facilitator.

The above data shows that the 'craft' of providing guidance and advice was less about telling people what to do, rather it was the '*gentle guidance*' to prompt and encourage the AL members to express their views and concerns. Here, I am reminded of the folktale of how the monkeys tried to save the fishes from the water because they thought that the fishes were drowning; the monkeys brought them out of the water only to see them lie lifeless on the dry land. Although the intention was noble, the actions proved fatal. So, guidance and advice has to be appropriate to the individual context. Thus, my self-reflective inquiry and social validation of the above responses, on providing guidance and advice within AL, has enabled me to establish my 'living theory'; that through this '*gentle guidance*' the AL members are supported to consider the 'action' that is appropriate for them in their personal and organisational context.

Overall, the findings on the craft of AL facilitation show that skills, such as the ability to ask the right question at the right time (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Sofo *et al.*, 2010; Cho and Bong, 2010; Gibson, 2011; Thornton, 2016; Edmonstone, 2017), demonstrate active listening, including: providing feedback, enabling critical reflection (Passfield, 1996; Boud *et al.*, 1996; O'Neil and Marsick, 2007), providing guidance and advise when required (Pedler and Abbott, 2013), raising self-awareness by 'learning how to learn' (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007), and 'contain' situations and emotions and recognising group dynamics (Vince and Martin, 1993; Vince, 1998; Thornton, 2016; Edmonstone, 2017), which are essential for effective AL facilitation. The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) also categorise effective participatory and interpersonal communication skills, such as effective verbal communication skills, active listening and providing feedback to participants as core competencies. However, questioning insight and critical reflection are considered to be unique

features of AL facilitation, which distinguishes it from other group learning interventions such as team coaching (Vaartjes, 2005).

5.3.3 The apparatus of AL Facilitation - The Processes and Structures that Support AL Facilitation

AL Structure and Process

The AL sessions within the post graduate programme had a set of processes which provided a structure for the AL facilitators. The ‘air-space’ within each session had a theme with a set of trigger questions to offer focus (**Appendix 27**). But, the flexibility within this structure was agreed between the facilitators and this was clearly communicated by them to their AL members. The overall findings endorse that both the structure and the flexibility within it supported the AL processes. This is confirmed by the AL members’ responses:

‘process was structured but otherwise it was open’; ‘the first session was more structure...another session looked at our leadership style, that one was far less structured...it was more fluid; ‘the first session was more structured, others more open but still covered what was expected’, ‘she created the environment and this was structured...then she offered an open space for what we wanted to talk about and she would facilitate that...so it was bit of both’ (AL members 1, 3, 12, 14).

Some of the AL members also talked about ‘maintaining checks and balances’, ‘boundaried time and space’, ‘it was not about finding a solution’ and ‘creating a safe environment’, which provide an image of the processes and structures applied by the AL facilitators:

‘She was the co-ordinator, she set the process – the warm up, mindfulness...and bring everybody to the room and get them involved so that all have an equal stake in the process...she provided clarification and maintained checks and balance – if anyone was drifting away, e.g. the conversation was moving away from the topic, she reminded them and the room about this. Also, she stressed that it was not about giving answers but being involved in finding solutions’ (AL member 12).

'The facilitator was really good and, in order for me to learn, she was quite boundaried in giving us our time, but the boundaries were not tight thought, they were quite loose. I think she was making it explicit about the reason why we were there... Instead of being solution focused, we had to explore the origins, like when we talked about the messy problem, she brought us back to focus...also there was a space offered for the other members in the AL set to contribute or ask us questions, so it was not just about her so we all fully participated in the AL set' (AL member 3).

'It was important to make sure that everybody got their turn, she structured the session...she participated in questioning herself, encouraging people to clarify a question, or reflect a bit further, she also reminded others that it is not about giving solutions but it is about helping someone to reflect on their own issues...she did the mindfulness at the beginning so that was important to bring people to the same level ...' (AL member 5).

'Part of the role was to facilitate and ensure that the group was managed, to create time boundaries and a framework in which the group had to operate, such as check in, mindfulness exercise etc. Also, to create a safe environment, that is to build trust, provide encouragement and support, all the things you need to give the support. Also, she made it feel light; so I was non-judgemental. So, for example, we were not supposed to answer the question ('problem') of the other member but give support to the other person to find the solution' (AL member 13).

This emphasis on providing a supportive and calming environment, where AL members 'felt' safe, were able to participate equally and exchange their views without any 'conflict', is also addressed in section 5.3.2. This once again highlights the overlap between the three themes of AL facilitation. Generally, the planned AL structure was applied by all the facilitators; the hand-out on AL was used by all the facilitators to set the scene for the sessions. This was fully recognised in the following comments:

'It is the power of the process that makes it work'; 'I did say a little bit at the beginning about the process...I went over ground rules and through the pages [of the handout]'; 'I wanted to set the scene of respect, learning, reflection, problem solving' (AL facilitator 2).

There was agreement that it was the responsibility of the facilitator to ensure that each AL member had adequate 'airspace'. The challenges of managing this, due to late arrivals of some AL members, was raised as an issue and addressed through the action research process. Reminder emails were sent out to prevent this and the importance of taking collective responsibility was reiterated in the 'study days'. The purpose of AL was also considered to be very important and needed to be clearly communicated to the AL members; as one facilitator observed, he ensured that this message was clear to all of his AL members:

'The context is the organisation and their project, but the actual programme is about them, their professional practice and, in particular, their leadership practice' (AL facilitator 1).

However, there was also acknowledgement that *'this was enough structure'* and that the process did not need to be more prescriptive. This was reflected as, *'effectively you introduce the process, just getting the right amount of process in and then letting them get on with it'* (AL facilitator 2). Another facilitator emphasised the need to *'work with what is in the room'*. For example, if the checking-in brought out anxiety, stress and concern, then even though, *'we may have a structure, we might have to move slightly in a different way, because you can't ignore those emotions, whereas this may not be the case in each AL set'*. This is reflected in the findings shown in Section 5.4.2 (Working with Emotions).

Variations within the Processes

In terms of how the 'structure' was applied, specific examples were discussed both in the group reflective gatherings and in my own reflective notes. There were instances when less was more, e.g. being less directive and allowing the conversations to emerge worked well.

'I found myself really comfortable not saying much...I felt there were such wonderful questions being asked and, also if you like, advocacy being offered, not necessarily telling them what to do, but because they were clinical issues...for example, have you thought of this service? Have you considered this? So, all I did was summarise and say: Is this making sense to you? What are your options now?' (AL facilitator 4).

'There was a silence and previously I'd have stepped in and I just thought, no, leave it, if somebody wants to go next, they can go next...I was thinking, should I be saying something and then somebody said something...so that was nice for me to sit back...because I sat back more, meant that the session was better, actually and I think they owned it more' (AL facilitator 3).

I also recorded an instance of this less directive approach in my reflective notes:

I found myself listening actively and did not feel the need to ask questions myself as I saw that there was great expertise on the subject in the room. I managed the process by rephrasing, summarising the options to consider and key points made by the AL members.

In other instances, in supporting the problem-solving process, I have been more directive and challenging; and through a process of enquiry and critical reflection, I have encouraged members to become critically conscious of their values, assumptions and actions by reframing their situation. For example, on one occasion, a participant's frustration was apparent as she explored her challenging relationship with her line manager. In my reflective account, I recorded:

...she shared her perspectives in response to questions from her group members and this continued for a while. After the first 10/15 minutes, or so, I found my body position change, I came forward in my chair, offering an indication to be more directly involved in the questioning as the conversation was becoming repetitive and not getting anywhere. I asked questions such as, how do you feel about your manager? Is there anything you want to change about this situation? I asked her...what advice would she give me if I was in her situation?

Here I created an opportunity for critical reflection, not necessarily seeking the correct answer or an immediate solution, but, by asking questions to frame the problem differently, the multiple perspectives within the situation were surfaced and this empowered the AL member to define her reality. This helped her to consider the power dynamics and question her own assumptions as the first steps to resolving her problem. Thus, as AL facilitators, although we had a set of AL processes, we applied the structure to respond to the needs of the AL members,

sometimes being more directive and challenging, and on other occasions, taking a less directive and more nurturing approach.

5.4 Practice of Mindfulness

Another aspect of the structure was the practice of mindfulness within the AL 'check-in' process. Both the AL members and the facilitators' responses confirm that overall, mindfulness exercises helped to enhance the quality of engagement in the AL sessions. The focus group responses and the post evaluation questionnaire also reaffirm the effectiveness of the mindfulness exercises. As mindfulness is about focusing on the present, although most of the AL members still talked about their work stresses, there was a more pragmatic approach to addressing this. This was noticed and highlighted in the GRG's:

'I think that the impact of giving them the mindful space, that's what I notice, because yes, some of them are having a really difficult time, they said, "yes... I've had a difficult day and I'll talk about it in my space but I'm okay" and "I'm really glad to be here", I've accepted that my work is always going to be like this, that kind of thing, so I think immediate impact is great' (AL facilitator 4).

It was noted within this group, that the feedback from the participants was overwhelmingly positive; only one of the 15 participants did not fully engage with the mindfulness exercises during the check-in process. The comments below confirm this:

'They engaged with it, they benefited from it, it made a huge difference actually to the feel of the set and so I'm really glad you introduced it. They all said afterwards...[they] don't get any time for this normally and I think actually what the mindfulness did was it gave them permission to be here, you now have three or four hours to yourselves, I think the mindfulness honoured that...it was really lovely' (AL facilitator 3).

'Most people seemed very relaxed, everybody was sat on a chair, a number of people had their hands on their knees and there was this sort of, you know, feedback afterwards because I asked, you know, how was it for you, how did you find that and so, yeah. One person used the word difficult, one person said it was positive and somebody talked

about the clock and how they were aware of the clock and the birds and that they hadn't been aware of them before, so I thought that was quite a nice start' (AL facilitator 2).

'In my set, they found that really useful, some have already started using it in practice, as in, one of them said, she was really stressed out and she tried to calm herself down and actually realised that she didn't have to do it all, so it really helped to kind of position her in the present...another person said that this is something that she's had embraced fully earlier, but she is now using it in her clinical sessions with her clients' (AL facilitator 4).

It was noted by the facilitator, who had the one AL member who found the mindful exercises difficult, that *'there's never silence where he works and that he always has a radio on and he can't cope with silence and I just thought, well, that's really interesting...'*; she also noted that another member who was going through a challenging situation at work was able to find *'this quietness within herself'*, in spite of lots of noise from the building site outside their room during one of the mindfulness exercise. This raised awareness amongst the AL facilitators that individual acceptance and engaging with mindfulness practices may vary.

Overall, the findings on the 'apparatus' of AL facilitation show that, having a structure and a set of processes supports the AL facilitator to create the conditions for learning for the AL members. Again, the need for group processes to maximise engagement relate to the International Association of Facilitators' (IAF) core competencies. The AL facilitator will need to demonstrate sensitivity in setting the appropriate pace of the AL sessions and use the structure and processes to help group members to make connections between learning and work experience, which then promotes action (Rimanoczy and Turner, 2008; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009). The application of mindfulness within the check-in process can 'heighten meta-awareness and decrease discursive cognition' (Kudesia and Tashi Nyiman, 2015:2), enabling the AL members to become more aware of patterns of thought, dominant stories and preoccupations in the present moment, which can improve their engagement in the learning process.

5.5 The WHY, WHAT and HOW of AL Facilitation

In this section, I have presented further analysis of the data by working through the relationship between the three main themes: the art, craft and apparatus of AL facilitation, with the identified codes. I then grouped them using the ‘W’ framework to address three key questions: WHY facilitate AL? WHAT do the AL facilitators need to do? And HOW can they facilitate?

The findings are presented in three tables, each addressing one theme at a time (Tables 4-6). The themes are related to the WHY, WHAT and HOW of AL facilitation and has enabled me to build a set of constructs that represent the emergent voices of the participants. It must be noted that there is a level of overlap, both within the themes as highlighted earlier and across the emerging voices of the participants. The three sets of themes are presented and analysed in Table 4.

Table 4: WHY facilitate AL?

Theme	Coding (using the ‘W’ framework)	Emergent Participant voices	Key constructs	Participant alignment
The art of AL facilitation	WHY	Sign-post for further support, guide Rationalise reason for emotion (think and reflect)	Advocacy Reflexivity	ALM1, ALM4, ALM11, ALF1, ALF2, ALF3
	WHAT			
	HOW	Approachable/ friendly/cheerful/welcoming Humble Genuine/fully present in the room Engaged at a personal level, Professional Supportive	Facilitator’s use of self	ALM1, ALM2, ALM3, ALM4, ALM7, ALM9, ALM10, ALM11, ALM12, ALM13, ALM14.

		Showed respect/listen to others and build on it, ‘respect in the voice’ Empathy/encouragement – ethics of care Non-judgemental, self-control, self-regulation Views were valued Acknowledgement/allowance for emotions Acknowledgement of diversity Confidentiality Lead in the right direction	Developing relationships/ building trust	ALF1, ALF2, ALF3
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Within the ‘art of facilitation’ theme, the emerging voices from the data of both AL members and AL facilitators, illustrate that a personal approach with genuine commitment and values, such as respect and inclusiveness, are essential for AL facilitation. Thus, the AL facilitator’s ability to make use of ‘*ones’ personal self*’, including ones’ personality traits, belief system, life experience and cultural heritage (Dewane, 2006), and develop relationships by building trust within the AL set, create attunement and bring harmony amongst the AL members, are key factors in the ‘art’ of effective AL facilitation. The facilitators showed a caring, empathic and genuine manner and openness and tolerance for ambiguity (Heron 1977, 1999; Edmonstone, 2017). The purpose of AL facilitation (the WHY of AL facilitation) also becomes clear from this data: the participant responses show that this is used to provide guidance, e.g. offer sign posting for further support and build reflexivity to be able to deepen learning, grasp key issues, make connections and draw conclusions (Brochback and McGill, 1998).

The next set of analysis is focused on the ‘craft’ of AL facilitation. The AL member interviews captured insights and experiences of the AL facilitation, specifically on the role, style and approach, which confirm the skills and knowledge of the AL facilitator. The AL facilitator interviews and the reflections also reveal the techniques and skills of facilitation (Table 5).

Table 5: WHAT do the AL facilitators need to do?

Theme	Coding (using the 'W' framework)	Emergent Participant voices	Key constructs	Participant alignment
The craft of AL facilitation	WHY	Provide constructive feedback Clarify context Asked reflective questions to help members to consider their own impact (e.g. how do I come across?) Encourage to think and reflect fully Encourage multi-perspectives Give advice, guidance	Enable inquiry Enable reflexivity Provide advocacy	ALM1,ALM4, ALM6, ALM7, ALM8, ALM9, ALM10, ALM11, ALM12, ALM14, ALF1, ALF2, ALF 3, ALF4
	WHAT	Ask open and insightful questions/'prompts'/seek clarification/explore options (not just finding a solution) Probing/asking questions Listen, showed he/she was really interested/made eye contact Summarising, rephrasing 'Felt listened to' Attention/thinking Encourage open disclosure Built confidence to be able to ask questions and share experiences	Generate opportunities Sense making for facilitator and participants	ALM1,ALM4, ALM5,ALM6, ALM7, ALM8, ALM9, ALM10, ALM11, ALM12, ALM13, ALM14, ALF1, ALF2, ALF 3, ALF4

		Reflective tone, engage in collective reflection Coaching style – listening, giving feedback Knowledge of the facilitator – sharing of experience, use of academic references Conscious of/manage group dynamics Showed leadership Able to get best out of people Raise self-awareness	Facilitate intra and inter dialogue Raise self and other awareness	
	HOW	Showed emotional maturity – reflection-in-action/anticipate and recognise own emotions Contain the situation and emotions (keep focus, help to calm down, validation of feelings and fact)	Use of self Provide conditions for learning	ALM1, ALM3,ALM4, AMM11, ALM12 ALM13, ALF1, ALF2, ALF3, ALF4

Here, the overall emergent participant voices confirm that the purpose of AL facilitation, e.g. ‘the WHY’, is to enable inquiry, reflexivity and provide advocacy. To ‘enable insight’, the AL facilitators provided feedback and clarified context to offer orientation and enable AL members to gain insights of their internal and external environment (Heron, 1977; Safs *et al.*, 2010; Leonard, 2015). This attitude of inquiry, fostered by the facilitator, can enhance learning (Cho and Bong, 2010; Gibson, 2011; Sofo *et al.*, 2010). The facilitator’s ability to enable the reflective process was another key ‘craft’. The findings highlight that the facilitators encouraged and enabled thinking and critical reflection to challenge presuppositions and perspectives (Mezirow, 1990) and enable the AL members to look at situations from multi-perspectives to define reality. The feedback from the AL members highlight that they were

able to recapture, notice and re-evaluate their experience to turn it into learning (Boud *et al.*, 1996). Providing guidance and advice, as appropriate, was also evident. However, this was less about telling people what to do, rather it was the '*gentle guidance*' to prompt and encourage the AL members to express their views and concerns. This providing advocacy was another key purpose of AL facilitation within this research.

The analysis shows that the craft of AL facilitation, specifically focusing on WHAT skills, techniques and knowledge the facilitators demonstrated are: facilitating intra and inter dialogue, sense-making for facilitator and participants, raise self and others awareness and generate possibilities by unlocking individual and group potential. The emergent participant voices clearly demonstrate that the AL facilitators encouraged open dialogue within the AL sets, so that diverse assumptions and options may be explored (Hogan, 2000). The AL facilitators simultaneously conducted an *internal dialogue (intra)*, through critical self-reflection by questioning their own assumptions, discrepancies and contradictions in experience (Reynolds, 1998; Rigg, 2017), to be able make appropriate responses. Thus, they were able to 'draw out answers' (Spencer, 1989, cited in Hogan, 2000:49) through effective questioning, prompting and seeking clarification. The insightful and critical questioning helped the AL members to make meaning and connections between learning and work experience, which then promoted action (Heron, 1977; Raelin, 1997; Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Pedler, 2005; Lawless, 2008; Ram and Trehan, 2009).

Encouraging sense making was an essential AL facilitation craft. The sense making took place at two levels; the AL facilitator was making sense of situations presented in the AL set and, at the same time, enabling sense making amongst the AL members. Another key skill was the ability to raise self and others awareness within the AL set. This was implicit within all the participant responses. The AL facilitators were able to empower AL members to overcome their barriers of recognizing their own assumptions and patterns of thought and behaviour (Boud and Walker, 1996), their discomfort to reflect on their own practice (Marsick and Maltbia, 2009) and inability to question (Cho and Bong, 2010), which raised their self-awareness, as well as others awareness, to being alert to others in the AL set. There was acknowledgement by some AL members, that the AL process built their confidence to ask questions and share experiences more openly.

Finally, the AL facilitators' ability to recognise and acknowledge both their own emotions, and others within the AL group, can also be related to their 'use of self', which contributed significantly to the effective AL process. This includes applying ones' personality traits, belief systems, life experiences and cultural heritage (Dewane, 2006) to creating the conditions, under which AL members could learn from each other (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007). The AL facilitators demonstrated the ability to 'hold' and 'contain' emotion laden situations/conversations (Thornton, 2016), showing understanding of group dynamics (Bion, 1961). Where possible, they were able to guide and empower AL members to gain 'insight or increased authority' (Vince and Martin, 1993). Thus, the ability to create a safe learning space is another key 'craft' of AL facilitation. The findings also highlight that the conditions for learning, provided by the AL facilitators, was supported by the AL structure and processes, that is the 'apparatus' of AL facilitation, which evident from Table 6.

Table 6: HOW can they facilitate?

Theme	Coding (using the 'W' framework)	Emergent Participant voices	Key constructs	Participant alignment
The apparatus of AL facilitation	WHY			
	WHAT	High rapport/high clarity Comrades in adversity All voices are heard'/ openness from all Community of practice	Facilitate intra and inter dialogue Sense making for facilitator and participants	ALM3, ALM5, ALF1, ALF2, ALF3
	HOW	Supportive/calming environment Harmony in the group and acceptance of each other, strong aspect of	Provide conditions for learning	ALM2,ALM3,A LM4, ALM5,ALM6,A LM8,

		<p>respect, listening and learning from each other – <i>self-directed, experiential learning</i></p> <p>Objective, but with warmth and empathy - ‘felt safe’ (along sidedness)</p> <p>The structure helped to moderate</p> <p>Equality – equal participation, <i>person-centred approach</i></p> <p>Structured/directive but in an open way</p> <p>Open/less-structured</p> <p>Calm/relaxed - ‘created a relaxed space’/‘made me feel at ease’</p> <p>boundaried, contained, main ‘Checks and balances’</p> <p>Create a culture of trust/ provide confidentiality’, ‘safe’ environment</p> <p>Provide space to be mindful/be calm</p> <p>Provide a platform/co-ordinate/structured discussion/exchange of views - Critical thinking</p>		<p>ALM9, ALM12, ALM13, ALM14, ALF1, ALF2, ALF 3, ALF4</p>
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The evidence of usefulness of AL structures and processes, which the AL facilitators applied with sensitivity, has already been presented earlier. The emergent voices of the AL facilitators showed ‘WHAT’ they did to engage in dialogue: using the AL process within the context of this study, which built rapport and ensured clarity of purpose to fully engage the participants. This enabled AL members’ ‘voices to be heard’ and offered an open space for making sense of issues presented in the AL sets, which was also reaffirmed by some of the AL members. Thus, threads of engagement in dialogue and sense making, was also evident within the ‘apparatus’ of AL facilitation.

In terms of ‘HOW’ the AL sessions were facilitated, there was clear evidence, from both the AL members and AL facilitators, that the AL structure and processes were applied appropriately to create a supportive and calming environment, which mainly offered harmony within the AL set. This structuring of processes, procedures and ways of learning is considered to be one of the dimensions in facilitation (Heron, 1977). The emergent participant voices provide examples of both supportive/non-directive, as well as challenging/directive approaches to engage AL members in order to gain new insights and resolve problems (Dilworth and Wills, 2003). The structure and processes also enabled the AL facilitators to manage the ‘air space’ time for each member, ‘to enable all voices to be heard’ and ensure equal participation. The agreed set of processes ensured confidentiality within the sets; the AL member voices clearly articulated the feeling of safety and trust within the groups (O’Neil and Marsick, 2007; Casey, 2011). Finally, the mindfulness exercises within the check-in process contributed significantly to ‘creating a relaxed space’, which further enhanced the learning environment.

Overall, the ‘W’ framework has enabled me to organise the descriptive data, which captured important information in relation to my research question, to build a set of constructs to enable me to theorise the pedagogy of AL as follows:

“WHY” facilitate AL: To enable reflexivity, inquiry and advocacy.

“WHAT” the facilitators need to do: To facilitate intra and inter dialogue, provide sense-making for facilitator and participants, raise self and others awareness and generate possibilities by unlocking individual and group potential.

“HOW” they can facilitate: Facilitator’s use of self-developing relationships and provide conditions for learning.

5.6 Summary

These findings provide rich data with in-depth insights and experiences of the AL members, as well as AL facilitators on the ‘art’, ‘craft’ and ‘apparatus’ of AL facilitation. The summative programme evaluation, collated through the responses from the focus group and post-evaluation questionnaire, offer strong evidence of the positive impact of the AL facilitation, which strengthens the validity of these findings, as stated earlier. The analysis of these findings demonstrates that the AL facilitator’s underpinning values and commitment to enhancing learning within the AL sets, their interpersonal and relational skills, prior knowledge and experience of effective facilitation of learning in groups and their ability to apply the AL processes sensitively to create a safe, calm space for learning, are the key aspects of the pedagogy of AL.

Through further summarising and interpretation of these findings, I have recognized patterns and relationships to theorise and find boarder meaning and implications (Patton, 1990; Braun and Clarke, 2006) to develop a final set of constructs related to the purpose of AL facilitation (WHY) and the requirements and conditions (WHAT and HOW) for effective AL facilitation. This has enabled me to establish the pedagogy of AL facilitation to achieve my overall research inquiry.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I draw the threads of my research together and offer conclusions that have emerged from my study. This doctoral programme has explored the practice of AL facilitation. It was developed, as a result of questioning my own practice as an AL facilitator and an increased curiosity to understand and capture ‘what was happening’ in the AL sessions. At the same time, I wanted to learn more about the role of the AL facilitator: the processes and capabilities a facilitator requires, to enable participants to learn and take action in an organisational leadership development programme and the conditions a facilitator needs to provide, in order for learning to take place.

First, I draw my conclusions from the research findings to address each of my research questions. Second, I consider the implications of the research to the theory of group learning and facilitation, with a specific focus on AL facilitation, including developing a model of the pedagogy of AL to show the relationships between the themes developed from the findings. Third, I discuss the implications of my research for practice: to improve my own practice; to enhance the practice of AL facilitation within the context of the current organisational programme delivered within my department and more widely for AL practitioners; and to make recommendations for training and continuous professional development of AL facilitators.

6.2 Discussion on the Research Questions

6.2.1 RQ1: What are the Pedagogical Practices of AL Facilitators within their Sessions?

The research provides an in-depth insight into the professional practice of AL facilitators within the context of this research. Furthermore, it establishes that the AL facilitator applies a set of methods and practices to facilitate learning, change and action, within the AL set. One of my ‘living theories’ (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) established through this research, is that the *AL facilitator’s ability to ask the right question at the right time*, is the most effective tool to understand the complexity of the problems raised within the AL set, to develop innovative strategies, build group cohesiveness and develop the leadership capabilities of the AL members (Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Edmonstone, 2017). Questioning, by the AL facilitator, which focuses

on examining underlying causes and long-range solutions, can provide the greatest leverage (Marquardt, 1999, 2004). Thus, the questions need to be both supportive and challenging, and appropriate to the context, to foster an attitude of inquiry (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; Cho and Bong, 2010; Sofo *et al.*, 2010; Gibson, 2012; Thornton, 2016). These questions can help structure the conversation and facilitate reflection to improve thinking and promote learning and change (Revans, 1980; Marsick and O'Neil, 1999). The empirical evidence shows that the AL members also learn how to ask the “right” questions, and through these questions, learn how to think in new ways (Pedler, 1991; Hoe, 2011).

Another facilitation skill is *active listening*, which is essential in other group development activities such as team coaching (Wageman *et al.*, 2008) and is also an important element within the AL process. Active listening requires giving undivided attention to the person speaking, acknowledging the message and using body language and gestures to convey attention. Responding appropriately and providing constructive feedback enables AL members to reframe issues and consider options. This raises their self-awareness and confirms that our ‘non-symbolic, non-verbal, procedural awareness’ as implicit knowing, enables us to ‘feel it in our body and sense it in our minds, together’ (Stern, 2004: 76). Groups are particularly good at bringing these unnoticed aspects of knowledge into the conscious realm because the *multiple perspectives* of the individual members ‘*amplifies*’ the communication and act as a reality check on each other (Thornton, 2016). The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) also categorise effective participatory and interpersonal communication skills, such as effective verbal communication skills, active listening and providing feedback to participants, as core competencies.

This research also establishes that the AL facilitator’s ability to *engage the AL members in thinking and reflection* is a key capability of the facilitator. This is another of my ‘living theories’ of AL facilitation. The research highlights that the AL members were encouraged by the comments and questions of their peers and the facilitator, to reflect and think critically, to make connections and consider new possibilities (Marquardt, 1999). This process of clarifying one’s thinking, enabled AL members to raise their self-awareness by ‘learning how to learn’ (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007) and begin to ‘think about their thinking’ (Sanyal, 2017). This relates to the metacognition process (Flavell, 1979) which encompasses the processes of planning, tracking and assessing one’s own understanding or performance. Thus, this research reaffirms that critical reflection is undoubtedly an integral part of how learning happens in AL

(Boud *et al.*, 1996; Dilworth and Wills, 2003; Pedler *et al.*, 2005; O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; Leonard, 2015).

The ability of the AL facilitator to *provide guidance and advice when required* (Pedler and Abbott, 2013), in a supportive way, is also an essential process. The 'craft' of providing guidance and advice was less about telling people what to do, rather it is a '*gentle guidance*' to prompt and encourage the AL members to express their views and concerns. This research enabled me to establish my 'living theory', that through this '*gentle guidance*', the AL members are supported to consider the 'action' that is appropriate for them in their personal and organisational context.

Another pedagogical method in AL facilitation is the AL facilitator's ability to *apply the apparatus*, that is, the *structures and processes* within the AL set, positively and with sensitivity, to respond to the AL members, sometimes being more directive and challenging, and on other occasions, taking a less directive and more nurturing approach. This structuring of processes, procedures and ways of learning is considered to be one of the dimensions in facilitation (Heron, 1977) and can be applied specifically in AL facilitation to create an environment for learning and engage the AL members for the purpose of gaining new insights and resolving problems (Dilworth and Wills, 2003). This need for a group process to maximise engagement is also a core competency of the International Association of Facilitators' (IAF).

Finally, the research clearly demonstrates that the *application of mindfulness*, as a process within the AL sessions, can create a relaxed space for learning by 'heightened meta-awareness and decreased discursive cognition' (Kudesia and Tashi Nyiman, 2015:2). This enables the AL members to become more aware of patterns of thought, dominant stories and preoccupations in the present moment, which improves their engagement in the learning process.

6.2.2 RQ2: What do AL Facilitators Value most about Themselves and their Role as a Facilitator?

The research validates that the AL facilitator's *understanding of the purpose and context of AL* as an intervention, is the first step to becoming an effective facilitator (Hunter *et al.*, 1999). The AL facilitator can demonstrate commitment by *use of 'ones' personal self*', including

personality trait, belief system, life experience and cultural heritage (Dewane, 2006), to develop relationships and build trust within the AL set and create attunement; generating harmony amongst the AL members. This demonstrates respect and acknowledgement of individuals and their issues, which will enable and empower the AL members to participate in a reflective inquiry to promote learning and actions. As established in literature, a caring, empathic, open and genuine manner, with a flexible approach and tolerance of ambiguity, can enhance the engagement and learning of participants in an experimental learning group, such as AL (Heron, 1999; Edmonstone, 2017).

Thus, the ability to *create a collaborative relationship, recognise diversity, ensure inclusivity and act with integrity, neutrality and professionalism*, are key qualities required by the AL facilitator which correlate with the International Association of Facilitators' (IAF) competencies. This centrality of the relationship, to maintain trust and build respect, is considered to be of primary importance across developmental interventions such as coaching and AL (Vaartjes, 2005).

6.2.3 RQ3: How do AL Facilitators Work with the AL Members' Emotions? How does that Impact on their Own Emotions?

In considering the emotional and intellectual realities of the AL members (Vince and Martin, 1993) and acknowledging the presence of individual and group defensiveness against learning, which is present in any learning group, this research highlights the need for the AL facilitator to *recognise the emotions and feelings of AL members* to be able to address difficult conversations which may be raised within the AL sessions. The capabilities of the AL facilitator, to *build trust and eliminate defensiveness* by creating a safe space for learning, is underpinned by their ability to create attunement, offer warmth, support, genuine concern and a flexible approach. At the same time, having a set of structures and processes can also enable the AL facilitator to create this place of safety, for emotions to be expressed and addressed appropriately.

The AL facilitator's *knowledge and awareness of behaviours and psychological processes within the groups* (Lewin, 1947; Bion, 1961, Bales, 1970; McLeish *et al*, 1973; Jaques 1984) and the ability to *take into account emotional, intellectual, non-verbal, content and context* of individuals engaged in group interaction, is essential to recognise and manage emotions within

the AL set. This *understanding of group dynamics* (Bion, 1961) will enable them to offer the ‘holding’ and ‘containing’ required (Thornton, 2016) to help and empower individuals, leading to ‘insight or increased authority’ (Vince and Martin, 1993).

This research provides evidence of a range of techniques, which the AL facilitator can apply to manage emotions within the AL set. These include: *maintaining focus* and steering discussions to avoid deviations, to be able to *view situations objectively but with understanding and warmth* at the same time, balance the *support required for the individual as well as keep others engaged* by demonstrating neutrality, validate feeling and facts in a supportive way, acknowledge challenging situations to empower and engage, listen and ask appropriate questions and finally, offer guidance and advice with a view to presenting opportunities and options for actions that are appropriate for them in their personal and organisational context. Finally, the AL facilitator needs *some preparation to be able to recognise and work with emotions* within the AL set, which can be both physically and psychologically demanding. Physically, rest can help to enhance focus and engagement; mental awareness of one’s own feelings and emotions can help the facilitator to think and respond appropriately in the moment or situation. Here, the *practice of mindfulness* can contribute significantly to creating a calm and restful space for this. The study shows that an *opportunity for group reflection of the AL* facilitators after an AL facilitation session, can be an effective vehicle, not only for off-loading, but also an effective process for individual and collective inquiry of practice. This can be a restorative, as well as a constructive process, for continuous professional development of AL facilitators.

6.2.4 RQ4: How do AL Facilitators Manage Differences/Conflicts and Difficult Situations During AL Sessions?

This research reaffirms that it is essential to *consider and recognise differences in groups*, rather than just manage them (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003). This involves the AL facilitator’s ability to understand, recognise, acknowledge, confront and reconstruct any differences within the AL set and members, rather than ‘bracketing’ them so that communication can be untainted (Giroux, 1988, 1992; Ellsworth, 1989; Weiler, 1991).

An observation on differences, which emerged from the research, is that not everyone can be expected to be at the same threshold of their readiness to learn. The possibility that, for some, there may only be surface learning or no learning at all, cannot be ignored. The research establishes that a *neutral and non-judgmental approach of the AL facilitator* is clearly a key capability to recognising and managing differences. The facilitator's ability to show 'unconditional positive regard', a positive feeling without reservations and making judgments (Rogers, 1962:416), is essential. Thus, the AL facilitator must *demonstrate congruence* and have the *emotional maturity* to be able to anticipate and recognise the dynamics in the group and have the presence to be able to *manage differences in group behaviours*.

As with managing emotions, *effective use of AL apparatus* can also help to create a supportive and harmonious environment within the AL set. The AL structure can assist the AL facilitator to manage the 'air space' time for each member to ensure equal participation, so that all voices can be engaged and heard. An agreed set of AL processes can ensure confidentiality within the set, to enable a feeling of safety and trust (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; Casey, 2011).

6.3 Implications for Theory

This research has several implications for the theory of AL facilitation. First, the research offers empirical evidence for the significance of the role of the *facilitator* in the AL process. Second, the research offers a theoretical *model of the pedagogy of AL facilitation*, relating the research findings on the art, craft and apparatus of AL to a learning process that enables a dialogical relationship between the facilitator of AL and the AL members, facilitating learning, change and action. Thirdly, the research provides evidence based practice of the application of mindfulness exercises within the AL process.

6.4 The Facilitator of Learning in AL

The empirical evidence for my research confirms the significance of the role of the *facilitator of learning* within the AL process who may be a 'coach', an 'advisor', an initiator or accoucheur²; a set facilitator or developer of wider organizational and professional learning in

²Male midwife – Revans (1998) endorsed initiators or 'accoucheurs' to help establish sets

the AL process (Revans, 1998; Marquardt and Waddill, 2004; Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Pedler, 2005; Lawless, 2008; Rimanoczy and Turner, 2008; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Ram and Trehan, 2010; Pedler and Abbott, 2013; O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; 2014). This research concurs with current literature on action learning that the independent role of a group facilitator accelerates learning, change and actions within an AL set and contradicts Revans' (1998, 2011) concerns that the action learning groups may become over-dependent on facilitators or professional educators, which he felt could hinder the group's growth. This research also reaffirms the work of O'Neil and Marsick (2014) that the facilitation role enables participants to recognize their own assumptions and patterns of thought and behaviour (Boud and Walker, 1996), address impatience and discomfort with their own practice (Marsick and Maltbia, 2009) and develop their ability to question their own practice (Cho and Bong, 2010). This assists the AL members to reassess, adjust and create new responses, through questioning and reflection, with support of the AL facilitator.

However, I would argue that the term 'action learning coach' (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004; O'Neil and Marsick, 2014) or a 'set advisor' (Pedler and Abbott, 2013), which is most commonly seen in the literature, needs to be reviewed to take into consideration the wider context in which AL is now applied, such as organisational leadership development programmes. In this context, the AL facilitator is an independent, expert role required to question insight to complex emotions, unconscious processes and offer up challenges to consider complex organisational dilemmas (Vince and Martin, 1993; Vince, 2004, 2008; Rigg, 2006) to enhance and maximise learning. The role is to acknowledge and recognise such complexities and challenges and make the process easier as a *facilitator of learning*, rather than just achieving a specific personal or professional goal. It is about enabling the AL members to focus on 'learning to learn' (O'Neil and Marsick, 2014) and 'think about their thinking' (Sanyal, 2017) through questioning and critical reflection, which Vaartjes (2005) suggests is a distinguishing feature of action learning. In contrast, a team coach often uses tools and models to enable team analysis and address difficult team conversations with a specific focus on the attainment of the team's goal attainment, which, according to O'Connor and Cavanagh (2016) potentially limits the level and depth of individual and collective reflections. Thus, the role of the facilitator in AL is wider than that of an 'adviser' and more encompassing than a 'coach', as knowledge and learning is socially constructed (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001) and created within the AL set, which is an 'inside-out' process facilitated by critical reflection on action (Passfield, 1996). The in-depth analysis of my research data clearly demonstrates that, although the role

the AL facilitator overlaps with that of a coach, to distinguish this role from a coach, specifically a team or group coach, the term '*action learning facilitator*' is more reflective of the conditions, capabilities and processes the AL facilitator needs to consider to enable the AL members to learn and take action.

6.5 The Pedagogy of AL Facilitation – The Art, Craft and Apparatus of AL

This research offers a model of pedagogy of AL, which I have presented as the art, craft and apparatus of AL by relating the research findings to a learning process that enables a dialogical relationship between the *facilitator of AL* and the AL members, enabling learning, change and action. I then developed a theoretical model which illustrates the relationships between the art, craft and apparatus of AL, as presented in Figure 21.

The 'art' of AL facilitation relates to the underpinning commitment and values of the facilitator, which they bring into their response to participants. The 'craft' of AL facilitation encompasses the facilitator knowledge, skills and experience. The 'apparatus' is the structures and systems that support the facilitation processes. The aim of the AL facilitator is to enable inquiry, reflexivity and provide advocacy. To enable insight, the AL facilitator must provide feedback and clarify context to offer orientation and enable AL members to gain an insight into their internal and external environment (Heron, 1977; Safs, Yeo and Villafane, 2010; Leonard, 2015). This *attitude of inquiry* is a 'craft', fostered by the AL facilitator, which enhances learning within the AL set (Cho and Bong, 2010; Sofo *et al.*, 2010; Gibson, 2012).

The ability to enable the reflective process is another key 'craft' of the AL facilitator. The AL facilitator must encourage and enable thinking and critical reflection to assist AL members to look at situations from multi-perspectives to define reality by recapturing, noticing and re-evaluating their experience to turn it into learning (Mezirow, 1990; Boud *et al.*, 1996). This ability of the AL facilitator to enable and *encourage reflexivity* within the AL set will deepen learning, help the AL members to grasp key issues, make connections and draw relevant conclusions (Brochback and McGill, 1998).

The AL facilitator may also be required to provide guidance and advice as part of the facilitative role. However, this should not be about telling the AL members what to do, although sign

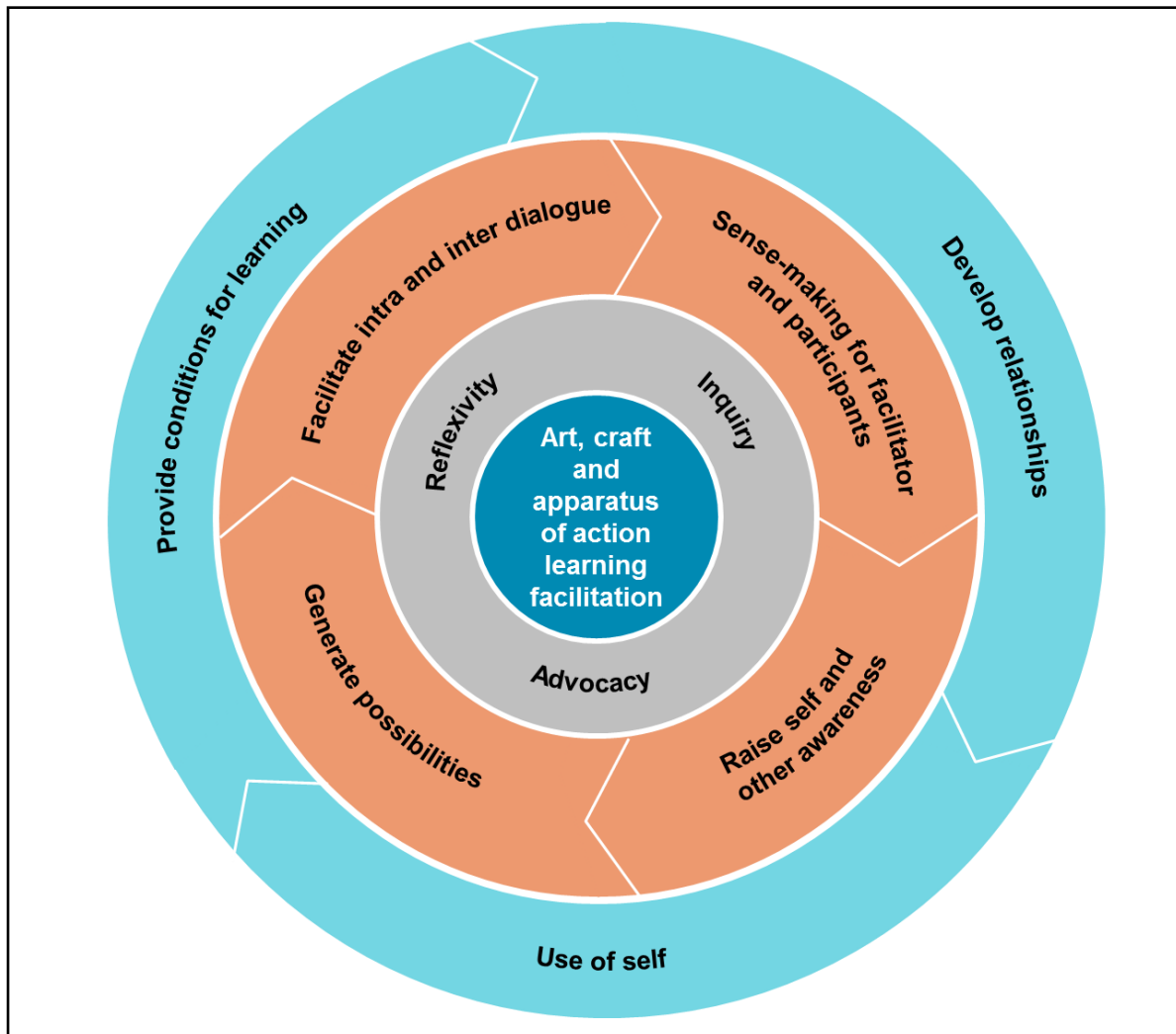


Figure 21: Pedagogy of Action Learning Facilitation.

posting for further support may be appropriate in some occasions. Rather, it is about ‘gentle guidance’ to prompt and encourage them to express themselves. I have defined this as *advocacy*, which is a process of supporting and enabling people to express their views and concerns, access information and services, defend and promote their rights and responsibilities and explore choices and options. So, this relates not merely to the ‘craft’, or skill of giving advice, but also the ‘art’ of the AL facilitator to demonstrate commitment and values that underpin their practice to support and encourage the AL members to explore their situations fully.

Next, what the AL facilitator needs to do to enable inquiry, reflexivity and advocacy within the AL processes is to demonstrate their capabilities to: facilitate intra and inter dialogue, provide sense-making for facilitator and participants, raise self and others awareness and generate

possibilities by unlocking individual and group potential. The AL facilitator must *encourage dialogue within the AL set (inter)* so that diverse assumptions and options may be explored (Hogan, 2000). They can do this by building rapport and ensuring clarity of purpose to fully engage the participants in meaningful conversations. The AL facilitator must be able to simultaneously conduct an *internal dialogue (intra)* through critical self-reflection by questioning their own assumptions, discrepancies and contradictions in experience (Reynolds, 1998; Rigg, 2017) to make appropriate responses and engage others in the conversational space (Lewin, 1946).

The AL facilitator must make sense of situations presented in the AL set and, at the same time, enable sense making amongst the AL members. The AL facilitator must be able to ‘draw out answers’ (Spencer, 1989, cited in Hogan, 2000:49) through effective questioning, prompting and seeking clarification. The insightful and critical questioning will help the AL members to make meaningful connections between learning and work experience, which, in turn will prompt action (Heron, 1977; Raelin, 1997; Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Pedler, 2005; Lawless, 2008; Ram and Trehan, 2010). Thus, *sense making for the facilitator and the participants* is an essential ‘craft’ of AL facilitation, enabling AL members’ ‘voices to be heard’ and using the open space for exploring and making sense of issues presented in the AL set, which will *generate possibilities* and in many cases, options for action by unlocking both individual and group potential.

Another key skill is the ability to *raise self and others awareness* within the AL set. The AL facilitator must empower the AL members to overcome their barriers of recognizing their own assumptions and patterns of thought and behaviour (Boud and Walker, 1996), their discomfort to reflect on their own practice (Marsick and Maltbia, 2009) and inability to question (Cho and Bong, 2010), which will raise their self-awareness, as well being fully alert to others within the AL set, e.g. develop ‘others awareness’. This study also shows that the AL process built the AL members’ confidence to ask questions and share experiences more openly, further enhancing their self and others awareness.

The final dimension of the model relates to how AL facilitation can be most effective, through the use of ‘self, develop relationships’ and providing the conditions for learning. The AL facilitator’s use of personal ‘self’, including ones’ own personality traits, belief systems, life experiences and cultural heritage (Dewane, 2006), with genuine commitment and values such

as respect and inclusiveness, are essential for AL facilitation. Thus, the AL facilitator's ability to make *use of one's self* and *develop relationships* by building trust within the AL group are the key factors in the 'art' of effective AL facilitation. The facilitator must be caring, empathic, and genuine and show openness and tolerance for ambiguity (Heron 1977, 1999; Edmonstone, 2017); this is about creating attunement through emotional sensing and connecting with the AL members. To develop effective relationships and build trust within the AL set, the facilitator must acknowledge and value their contributions, be non-judgemental, show respect and accept diversity. The AL facilitator's ability to recognise and acknowledge their own and others emotions within the AL group can also relate to their 'use of self', which can contribute significantly to the effectiveness of the AL process. The AL facilitator must be able to 'hold' and 'contain' emotion laden situations/conversations (Thornton, 2016), showing understanding of group dynamics (Bion, 1961). This 'use of self' relates closely to creating the conditions under which AL members could learn from each other (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007). Where possible, the AL facilitator must be able to guide and empower AL members to gain 'insight or increased authority' (Vince and Martin, 1993). Thus, the ability to create the conditions for learning is another key 'craft' of AL facilitation.

The AL facilitator's ability to apply structures and processes appropriately, can contribute significantly to *providing the conditions for learning*. This structuring of processes, procedures and ways of learning is considered to be one of the dimensions in facilitation (Heron, 1977). The structures and processes will enable the AL facilitator to manage the 'air space' time for each member, 'to enable all voices to be heard' and ensuring equal participation. An agreed set of processes will offer confidentiality within the sets, creating a feeling of safety and trust within the groups (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; Casey, 2011). At the same time, the AL facilitator must also demonstrate the ability to be supportive/non-directive, as well as challenging/directive as required, to engage AL members for the purpose of gaining new insights and resolving problems (Dilworth and Wills, 2003). Thus, AL facilitator's use of self, ability to develop relationships and create the conditions for learning, by sensitive use of the AL structures and processes, is the apparatus of AL facilitation.

6.6 Mindfulness Practice in AL Facilitation

Within the context of this study, mindfulness practice was applied as an AL process by the AL facilitators. The research provides evidence based practice of the application of mindfulness exercises within the AL check-in process that contributed significantly to creating a relaxed and calm space, which further enhanced the learning environment within the AL sets. The responses of the AL members confirmed that the 5 to 7 minute mindfulness practice at the start of the AL sessions, helped them to relax and become more aware of their own pattern of thoughts, which in turn improved concentration, empathy and flexibility in their thought process (Alexander *et al.*, 1987; Arguelles *et al.*, 2003, Brown and Rayan, 2003; Lakey *et al.*, 2008; Baron, 2016). This appeared to enable the AL members to take a much more pragmatic approach to the complex and challenging work issues and stresses which were raised within the AL sets. It also enabled the AL facilitator to be ‘fully present’ by ‘heightened meta-awareness and decreased discursive cognition’ (Kudesia and Tashi Nyiman, 2015:2).

Consequently, the facilitation of the mindfulness practices can embed a calm and relaxed environment within the AL set. The research illustrates that the AL facilitator can apply such practice as an ‘apparatus’ of AL facilitation. However, the AL facilitator must be aware that individual acceptance and engagement with mindfulness practice may vary amongst participants and therefore, will need to be sensitive in its application, as with other AL processes. Overall, this research contributes to empirical research on mindfulness practice in AL facilitation and shows that the application of mindfulness within the check-in process of AL can ‘heighten meta-awareness and decrease discursive cognition’ (Kudesia and Tashi Nyiman, 2015:2), enabling the AL members to become more aware of patterns of thought, dominant stories and preoccupations in the present moment, which can improve their engagement in the learning process.

6.7 Implications for Practice

The results of this research also have important practical implications. First, my ‘living theories’ (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) illustrate that the AL facilitator can enable participants to present their issues, listen, question, reflect and take action (Pedler and Abbott, 2013), as well as encourage and empower other AL members to engage in this social learning process.

The process of developing my ‘living theories’ has raised my self-awareness as an AL facilitator, embedded the practice of critical reflection within my work and helped me to build a method of AL practice. Second, the research offers evidence based practice of skills, capabilities and processes, which AL practitioners can adopt within their own practice, both in the context of the current organisational programme delivered within my department and more widely, by AL practitioners in a range of contexts including leadership education. Finally, I offer recommendations for training and continuous professional development of AL facilitators.

6.8 Implication for my Practice - my ‘Living Theories’

I have established a thorough critical reflection and self-analysis of my own practice of AL facilitation that AL offers opportunity to reflect and think critically, to make connections, analyse the issue(s) and to consider new possibilities to address work situations raised by AL members. This process of personal validation (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) has helped me to understand that, as an AL facilitator, I need to facilitate the learning process to ensure that the individual is able to reflect on and reframe his or her situation, e.g. the problem. Therefore, it is not about either the process or the problem, but more about facilitating learning and action for all. Similarly, although my focus is on the individual, as the organisation is the context; my facilitation is context-specific which impacts on both individual and the organisation. Next, through the group reflective gatherings of the AL facilitators, which is one of my research methods, I have been able to understand, test and justify my personal validation. This process of social validation, through a co-operative inquiry (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006; Heron and Reason, 2008), has enabled me to undertake further critique of my AL practice and consider areas for improvement. Through this self-reflexive enquiry, I have developed my ‘living theories’ (as stated in Chapter 5) of AL facilitation through three interrelated processes (as outlined in section 6.8.1 – 6.8.3).

6.8.1 Enquiry – Asking the Right Question

Through the process of personal and social validation I have identified that the first step to enabling the AL member to consider suitable solutions to his/her work issues, is to encourage open, as well as a socratic style of questioning within the AL set. Through my reflections and

discussion within the GRG's, I have recognised that finding the right question to ask at the right time is an essential facilitation skill. These questions can help to structure the conversations, facilitate reflections to improve thinking and promote learning and change (Revans, 1980; Marsick and O'Neil, 1999). I have identified specific questions to ask to explore issues. At the same time, there have been occasions where my role has been to encourage other AL members to engage in questioning; such questions have helped to frame issues differently and define reality. This enables members to look at situations from multiple perspectives so that options, or at least the initial exploration to finding a solution, can begin. Each AL member can then get a more realistic and truthful impression of himself/herself as a person, increase their ability to self-question and reflect and take action (Sanyal, 2017).

6.8.2 Reflexivity: Creating Ways of Thinking and Feeling

In the AL set, each AL member is encouraged by the comments and questions of their peers and the AL facilitator, to reflect and think critically, make connections and analyse seemingly contradictory data to consider new possibilities. This enhances the ability to challenge presuppositions and perspectives (Mezirow, 1990), learn how to think in a systematic way and handle problems in a complex organisational context (Marquardt, 1999). This process of clarifying one's thinking will enable AL members to begin to think about their thoughts (Sanyal, 2017). This relates to the metacognition process (Flavell, 1979), which encompasses the processes of planning, tracking and assessing one's own understanding or performance. However, reflection is also a 'bridge between experience and learning, involving both cognition and feelings' (Gray, 2007:496). Therefore, learning can take a collective social process within the AL set, building the skills of reflexivity, involving both thinking and feelings for creative possibilities and solutions to issues raised within the AL set.

6.8.3 Advocacy: Exploring Possibilities and Options

The third integral process is to support and enable the AL members to express their views and concerns, ensure access to relevant information and services, exercise their rights and responsibilities and explore choices and options. The AL facilitator can support the AL members to consider the 'action' that is appropriate for them in their personal and organisational context. The other AL members can be encouraged by the AL facilitator to ask, rather than tell, and if personal insights/examples are shared, this is done in agreement with the

group. I have adopted these ‘living theories’ within my own practice and integrated them within the model of pedagogy of AL facilitation (presented above) for consideration and application, both within my own institution and more widely by other human resource development professionals and AL practitioners.

6.9 Implications for Learning and Practice of AL Facilitation

This research proves empirical evidence of the conditions, capabilities and processes for effective AL facilitation which can be considered and applied by practitioners. The research demonstrates that an AL facilitator must be approachable, calm, relaxed and supportive, as well as flexible, to meet the needs of the AL members. The values that underpin the facilitation practice must encompass attunement through emotional sensing and connecting, respect and empowerment, along with the ability to be non-judgemental and self-regularity. The skills and capabilities highlighted through the research findings include: the ability to ask insightful questions (including prompting, rephrasing, summarising, probing), active listening, providing constructive feedback, raising self and others awareness, provide guidance and advise when required, enable thinking and reflection, ‘contain’ situations and emotions and recognise group dynamics. The range of knowledge and application of models, which the AL facilitator can adopt in practice, include the importance of ‘building rapport and clarity of purpose’ (coach/mentoring model), organising reflection, experiential learning (including acknowledgement of emotional domain and political context), team dynamics, using dialogue to make meaning, sense making and individual and organisational learning theories.

The research offers examples of AL structures and processes, including evidence-based practice of the AL facilitator’s ability to apply variations within such processes to maximise learning within the AL set. The research also provides evidence of application of mindfulness practice within the AL process which can be adopted within the practice of AL facilitation. Finally, the research offers empirical evidence of AL as an effective method for leadership development by providing a safe space for reflection, self- enquiry and action.

Overall, the research makes a contribution to the practice of AL facilitation through a pedagogic model of AL facilitation which is a holistic point of reference for learning and practice in this role. A number of features differentiate this model from other approaches. First,

it addresses a gap in the current literature on AL as there is no specific model on AL facilitation addressing its pedagogy. Second, the model provides a framework for AL practice, identifying the processes, capabilities and conditions required for effective AL facilitation. Thirdly, the model can enable organisations considering AL as a learning intervention, to identify the purpose and practice of AL by addressing the Why, What and How of AL. Fourth, the application of mindfulness to create the conditions for social learning is clearly evident from this research and should be considered within the AL processes.

6.10 Recommendations for Continuous Professional Development of AL Practice

As a process of human enquiry, as suggested by Whitehead and McNiff (2006), I believe that on-going action-reflection should be integrated within the practice of AL. Through self-reflexive and group reflective processes, AL practitioners can validate good practice, as well as identify key areas that require on-going critical reflection and analysis. The group reflective process can be formalised as part of the AL practice as a form of ‘group supervision’ offering a space for AL facilitator practitioner to ‘off-load’, as well as provide an effective process for individual and collective inquiry of practice. This can be a restorative, as well as a constructive, process for continuous professional development of AL facilitators. I have identified a set of practice questions (Table 7) with suggested ‘so what?’ questions for the practitioners of AL to enhance and improve the practice of AL (Sanyal, 2017).

Table 7: Key questions to improve AL practice.

Further practice questions	The ‘so what?’ for the practitioner
What are the AL set members expecting? Are they expecting to be taught? Are they expecting the facilitator to solve their problems?	What are my intentions as a facilitator?
How do I pick up on body language, eye contact, facial expression, the tone of the voice and any outside noise?	How do I remain alert/heighten my self-awareness?
How do I stay close to the problem, but not too close?	How do I continue to balance this?

Do I manage emotions in the group?	Am I aware of emotions? Mine and others?
Are participants expected to find the answer to their own problem?	Is there too much emphasis on the outcome?
Are we facilitating individual or organisational development, or both?	What am I learning and what is my organisation learning about this?

These questions could also form the basis for further research on AL facilitation, particularly as so far, there is limited literature specifically on the role of the AL facilitator (O’Neil and Marsick, 2014). There is also scope for a comparative study on AL facilitation skills, such as asking the right question, enabling reflective thinking and supporting the process of taking actions with other learning interventions such as coaching; specifically team coaching. The concept of metacognition (Flavell, 1979) would also be explored alongside the more recent notion involving both cognition and feelings (Gray, 2007) within the learning process. Finally, the model of pedagogy of AL facilitation provides a basis for training, learning and continued professional development of the AL practitioner. The model can be applied to develop the skills, capabilities, conditions and processes required for effective AL facilitation, both within training and accredited programmes.

Thus, this research establishes the significance of the role of the AL facilitator in the AL process, provides a model for the AL facilitation practice and offers mindfulness practice as a method of AL practice, which makes a contribution to the literature on the role of the AL facilitator. The establishment of my ‘living theories’ of AL facilitation, offer a method of learning for others, as well as a process of enquiry into their own practice (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). The recommendations and suggestions for on-going development of AL facilitators make practice contribution to continuous professional development in the field of AL practice.

CHAPTER 7: A CRITICAL REFLECTION OF THE RESEARCH IMPACT ON MY PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

I chose to study a Doctor of Professional Studies (DProf) to further develop and enhance my research capabilities and to embed my transition from practice to academia, closing the gap between them both. As I was keen to inquire into my own practice, this practice-based research on facilitation of AL gave me the opportunity to review my practice alongside my co-working AL facilitators. This exploration of my practice and research has re-contextualised my formative influences and reshaped my professional identity during the period of my doctoral programme.

A research undertaking of this level carries many responsibilities to participants and to the wider community who might wish to use the work in ways that may lead to policy change, for example. I took this responsibility seriously, as I do my own practice. Maguire (2018) refers to this responsibility when proposing personal and professional integrity as the guiding principle, a methodology even, for every choice made during a research undertaking. Carrying out a critique of self, therefore, at the beginning of a practice-based doctoral research programme, which puts one's self at the centre of the research, made increasing sense as I progressed. That critique gave me an opportunity to consider my experience to date, reflect on the learning acquired and demonstrate how I developed my professional practice as a consequence of those experiences. This was mainly a positive experience, but on further reflection as I became immersed in my research I realised there had been limited reflexivity in my thinking at the early stage. In contrast, the personal critique in the introduction of this report, which I now position as transparency and a positioning of the researcher in the context of the research, starts with my formative years, through to my higher education, the phases of my career and then my transition to academia, culminating in the stimulus for my doctoral study. This process stimulated a greater awareness of why I do, what I do and how I do it. I was able to dig deep into my ingrained values and beliefs to understand that cultural transmission and learning (Lehmann *et al.*, 2010; Van Schaik and Burkart, 2011) had sown the seeds of my engagement with the concept of 'facilitation' from a very young age. I was also able to relate my early career and professional experience to my interest and passion for effective facilitation of learning.

However, between completing the first phase of my doctoral study in 2013 and having my research proposal on facilitation of AL accepted in 2015, I went through a steep learning curve. I initially chose *'The role of mentoring in supporting the employability agenda in Higher Education: a case study of Middlesex University Business School'* as my doctoral focus as I was leading on an e-mentoring programme and was working closely with other colleagues in the implementation of two other mentoring projects within the Business School. These were all aimed at enhancing students' learning experience and supporting their personal and career development.

These projects offered myself and the team involved with mentoring projects, an opportunity to learn from the shared experiences, to develop new knowledge and insight, increase expertise in coaching and mentoring within the team and create a body of empirical data for further research within the department. However, during the development of my research proposal, the university's employability strategy and agenda was shifting. As I started to conduct a series of interviews with heads of departments and seek guidance from my supervisor and my sponsor, I realised that there were tensions which I did not know how to address or to seek help for what I needed. I found myself questioning my intellectual agility to work and write at doctoral level, struggled to develop a coherent research proposal and went through several months of doubting my ability to undertake doctoral study. This was a challenging period in my doctoral research and in my professional life. I reflected on how many excellent initiatives that make an impact can fall to one side when contextual factors change and that, without that knowledge being evaluated, codified and embodied in an artefact, the learning from such initiatives would also be lost.

It was during this time that I was asked to lead on the bespoke Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management Programme in collaboration with a local Mental Health Trust, on behalf of the Business School. I committed myself willingly and with considerable enthusiasm to designing and delivering the programme, which included AL facilitation. After a successful delivery of the programme, combined with excellent feedback from the participants, especially on AL, I realised the potential of a practice based research project which could lead to capturing the learning for others beyond participants. I seized this opportunity to initially develop and present conference papers and then to seek support from my sponsor to revise my research topic. I also engaged with other stakeholders within my university to seek guidance and advice on this. I now recognise that my ability to respond,

adapt and change to an emerging situation enabled me to re-engage with my doctoral work and rebuild my own self-confidence. I was not able to resolve the issues around the topic of employability and mentoring, but I believe I was proactive in finding an alternative research focus which was appropriate to my research interests.

I had clarity on the aim and objectives of my research and had a set of ‘working’ research questions as a part of my research proposal. But, as I started to go through the action research cycles, I recognised the need to revise the research questions to fully reflect the research context. Similarly, I went through several iterations of the semi-structured interview questions before finalising them. Here, I was able to fully appreciate the expert support and supervision from both my university supervisor and my external consultant, whose open questioning and constructive feedback helped me to ensure that my interview questions fully related to the research questions and therefore to the overall aim of the research. This has been an important learning journey for me as an academic and I will apply similar techniques in dissertation supervision to support my students in their research work.

The gap between practice and academic eluded me in terms of the details. I knew there was a gap, but I was not sure what constituted this resistance to closer cooperation. I had indications such as theories and different kinds of discourses which were not directly pertinent to my practice and came to realise that the gap and the resistance was in me. I needed to visit this ‘island’ where academics live and learn from them. My university employs many senior level practitioners to teach in the university and develops those practitioners as teachers through a range of professional development strategies. However, many of my colleagues, and myself, are aware we are not career academics and often do not speak the same language. Academics use a language of theories and concepts, of philosophy and reasoning. I decided that I needed to read more and soon found an understanding of the language falling into place. I enjoyed the concepts of research philosophies, approaches and methods. In developing a framework to guide the collection and analysis of my research data (Anderson, 2004), I now understood the relevance and value of considering my ontological values of how I see myself in relation to others in the world, as well as epistemologically of how I interpret the world around me and how I know what I know. This process enabled me to appreciate and establish the rationale for the choice of my research methods. Again, in considering a suitable method of data analysis, I learnt that, as a researcher, the central requirement in qualitative data analysis is the ability to think and process information in a

meaningful and useful manner (Fetterman, 1998). This helped me to devise an interpretative frame using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to theorise the significance of the research themes and their broader meaning and implications (Patton, 1990; Braun and Clarke, 2006). As an early career researcher, this opportunity to construct and apply an organising frame, which was specific to the purpose of my research, enabled me to interpret the data to address my research questions.

Consequently, the overarching principle of taking ‘an attitude of inquiry’ (Marshall and Reason, 2007), both to improve my own practice through my own lived experience using the concept of living theory (Whitehead, 1989; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006), as well as through ‘co-operative inquiry’ (Heron and Reason, 2008) and mutual exploration (Marshall, 2016) with my co-action learning facilitators, has started me on a journey of being in the world, which I can describe as ‘living life as inquiry’ (Marshall, 1999). I have aligned myself to Marshall’s approach of ‘living continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges and bringing things into question... to open [myself] to [continue to] ...question what I feel, do and want... and finding ways to engage actively in this questioning and process its stages’ (Marshall, 1999:156-7). Also, the notion of ‘weaving between inner and outer arcs of attention’ (Marshall, 2001, 2006) has helped me to enhance my awareness of what is happening at a personal level, as well as value opportunity for mutual exportation in a co-operative inquiry with other professionals and academics.

The application of my chosen research methods has had another significant benefit for me relating to critical reflection. It has made me consider whether or not my personal reflections may have benefited from a set of trigger questions, such as Tom Bournier’s (2003) twelve questions as a tool for reflective learning and whether this would have added rigour or restricted my diary’s narrative style of recording my personal reflections? After reading Marshall’s work (2001, 2006), I also reflected on whether I could have asked the two other AL facilitators to provide me with their record of individual reflections which may have added to the richness of the data. However, the group reflective gatherings, for which initially I had a set of questions to guide our conversations, became freer flowing as they progressed; they provided rich data and were a key cycle in the action research. It also provided the opportunity for social validation of my living theories. This made me consider the interface between ‘apparatus’, e.g. processes such as Tom Bournier’s (2003) twelve questions, and my own reflective gathering trigger questions and the open act of reflection.

I was also struck by some of the clearly articulated interview responses on the effectiveness of the AL facilitation. Although, initial evaluation findings had clearly indicated the effectiveness of AL, the overwhelming positive feedback from the interview participants, both on the AL facilitation and the mindfulness practice surpassed my expectations. As a researcher, the opportunity to hear the ‘voices’ of the AL members through the interview process and then being able to convey these ‘voices’ through my research was a very rewarding and powerful experience.

I have realised that inquiry is relational and I can begin to make sense by paying attention to social interactions. Going forward, I will engage with co-researchers to strengthen and enhance my ‘attitude of inquiry’ (Marshall and Reason, 2007). Thus, this doctoral work is just the beginning of living my life as an inquiry, by paying continual attention to myself and the world around me, engaging in cycles of learning, being mindful at all times and learning continually.

The process of undertaking this doctoral research has also developed my professional expertise in facilitation of learning in general and specifically in action learning. I am currently the Programme Leader for a new Post Graduate Certificate in Strategic Leadership, aimed at senior leaders and managers in the Mental Health Trust, which includes action learning as a method of leadership development. This has enabled me to apply my learning and knowledge for this doctoral study into my current practice. I have also integrated action learning as a method within the modules I lead on the new MA in People Management and Development. From an academic perspective, I have successfully presented papers on the topic of action learning at conferences since the start of my doctoral journey as listed below.

Sanyal, C., Rigby, C., Nicholds, A., and Hartog, M. (2015) *“Why and how Action Learning works within a Leadership Development programme: a case study within a UK Public Sector Leadership and Management post-graduate programme”*, 16th International Conference on Human Resource Development Research and Practice: Towards Evidence Based HRD Practice: Bridging the Gap, Ireland.

Sanyal, C. (2016) *“How can Action Learning support managerial leaders to resolve complex problems”*, 5th Biannual International Conference – Action Learning: Research and Practice, Action Learning in Challenging Times: Questioning Insight, Challenging Practice.

Sanyal, C. and Rigg, C. (2016) “*How can the concept of mindfulness be effectively integrated within management learning: a pilot case study within a Public Sector Leadership and Management Post Graduate programme*”, 17th International Conference on Human Resource Development Research and Practice: Leadership, Diversity and Changing Practices in HRD in a Global Context, Manchester.

Sanyal, C. and Rigg, C. (2017) “*In what ways does the introduction of ‘mindfulness’ in a Leadership and Management programme help managers to learn about self-care and resilience: a pilot case study within a Public Sector Leadership and Management post-graduate programme*”, 18th International Conference on Human Resource Development Research and Practice, Lisbon.

Sanyal, C. and Rigg, C. (2017) “*Self-Care, Resilience and Resistance – can we have it all? Exploring contradictions in the integration of mindfulness to leadership development*”, 10th International Critical Management Studies (CMS) Conference, 2017, Liverpool.

I have also recently achieved one journal publication:

Sanyal, C. (2017). Learning, action and solutions in action learning: investigation of facilitation practice using the concept of living theories. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 1-15 and a book chapter on a comparison of action learning and team coaching is due for publication in 2018.

At a more personal level, this doctoral engagement has been one of self-discovery. I have ‘unconcealed’ (Heidegger, 1978) a lot about myself and feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to crystallise my learning and knowledge on AL facilitation, a role that holds great importance for me.

*‘Your hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and nights.
But your ears thirst for the sound of your heart’s knowledge.
You would know in words that which you have always known in thoughts.’*

(On Self-Knowledge by Kahlil Gibran)

When I started to consider AL facilitation as my research topic, and to think about what was happening in the AL learning space, what this meant for me and my practice, I had a vision of a lotus flower. This flower has a centre which is often only partially visible; each petal appears to be separate but is held together at the centre.



I related this to the practice of my AL facilitation – as a facilitator I need to be partially visible, to be there to help and support the learning, but not take over. The petals represent the AL members who are at the AL sessions as individuals, but there needs to be alignment to enable collective engagement, reflection and learning. These early thoughts and visualisations have been reaffirmed and become clearer in my mind as I have conducted this research. The lotus flower, which is symbolic of purity of the body, speech and mind while rooted in the mud, always looks so clean and pure against the background of the dirty pond, has now become representative of the AL facilitation role and practice. My research has shown that, through the values (attunement, emotional sensing, connecting, respect, empowerment, non-judgement and self-regulation) which underpin AL practice, the facilitator can create the conditions of learning for the AL members who are in challenging and difficult work environments (in muddy waters). This resonates for me with Schon's swamp workers analogy (1995).

Thus, the lotus flower is for me symbolic of the practice of AL facilitation. I will embody this in my own AL facilitation by aiming to provide a calm and safe space for reflection and learning; a space where the AL members have the opportunity to articulate, consider and think through their work issues and challenges away from their everyday work environment. I will continue to build my capacity to engage and connect with the AL members through my genuine commitment to creating collaborative relationships by recognising diversity and ensuring inclusivity. I will act with integrity and neutrality, encouraging the same of the AL members so that the practice of AL is as pure and clear as represented by a lotus.



Say not, “I have found the truth,”, but rather, “I have found a truth”.

Say not, “I have found the path of the soul”, say rather, “I have met the soul walking upon my path”.

For the soul walks upon all paths.

The soul walks not upon a line, neither does it grow like a reed.

The soul unfolds itself like a lotus of countless petals.

(On Self-Knowledge by Kahlil Gibran)

I may not have found the whole ‘truth’, but what I have found through this research, particularly from the model of pedagogy of AL facilitation, I am keen to share and deliberate with academics and practitioners to build on this work as my on-going engagement and contribution to the practice of AL.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1



A University Teaching Trust

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT (PG Cert LM)

This programme of study has been designed by Middlesex University Business School in partnership with Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health Trust (BEH MHT) to meet our strategic and leadership development objectives and at the same time to facilitate academic qualifications through learning in the work place.

Frequently asked Questions

What is this about?

This programme allows you to gain an academic qualification in leadership and management through learning in the work place. The programme supports your learning through provision of study days and action learning sets. Your learning is demonstrated and assessed by submission of two assignments - each of which is a module carrying 30 credits at Level 7. As part of the programme you will lead a service improvement project and then reflect upon your planning and learning from this in your assignments.

Who offers this programme?

This certificate has been commissioned by the Trust from Middlesex University Business School and designed in partnership to meet the Trust's needs.

What qualification does this lead to?

The framework of two modules leads to a leadership development qualification at Post Graduate Certificate level (60 credits at level 7) from Middlesex University.

Who is this aimed at?

You will be leading a team - clinical or non-clinical in the Trust, although consideration will be given to all applicants as long as your role has scope to apply the learning. Equally important is that you are looking to broaden your role within the Trust and are keen for an opportunity to learn how to make a difference. You should normally possess a UK undergraduate degree in

any subject or the equivalent overseas qualification - or have strong supporting evidence of equivalent experience.

How much time does it need?

The programme involves an induction day, six study days, four half day action learning sets, some time to read around the subjects and time to prepare for two assignments - between January and September 2016.

What does the Programme involve?

The Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management will consist of a combination of study days and action learning leading to the preparation of the 2 assignments.

Six Study days

1. Leading & Managing People (relationship between management and leadership, different styles of management & leadership, values-based, distributed & transformational leadership).
2. Leading and managing change (The process of change, initiating and leading change, resistance to change – your own and others', engaging people with and supporting through).
3. Strategic Service Development (the meaning of strategy, NHS Strategy, Strategies for Service Improvement, strategy in your context).
4. Managing People Performance (The meaning of performance management, knowing your own biases, benchmarking and evidence-based decision making, difficult conversations).
5. Team learning & development (team formation, roles, working together, and working across teams, challenges and power dynamics).
6. Personal and leadership Development (your professional learning , understanding your learning/ leadership styles/preferences, exploring motives for leadership and underlying assumptions/issues, learning disabilities).

Each of these study days will be delivered as a whole day workshop and will include time for group work to meet the requirement of the programme.

The 6 Study Days will:

- increase knowledge of evidence-based theoretical frameworks of the external and internal factors influencing performance.
- increase knowledge and understanding of self and interpersonal behaviours informing and shaping leadership style.
- increase knowledge and understanding of approaches to initiating and leading change interventions.

✓ **Action Learning Sets** - 4 x half day action learning provision will provide a safe and confidential forum to:

- deepen understanding of concepts and contexts discussed in the Study Days.
- develop skills of dialogue and reflective practice to support peers as they address issues.
- network to increase organisational knowledge and confidence.
- understand how to capture learning and plan to implement learning via the two module assignments.

✓ **Post Graduate modules**

1. Module LWO4111 Review of Learning & Leadership Development project (Level 7) –Drawing upon on the study days, you are required to provide an account of your key learning experience and how these link to your Personal Development Plan (PDP). You will also identify a coherent and viable leadership development ‘stretch’ project at work which will support your on-going professional development and involve leading a service improvement/organisational intervention.
2. Module LWO 4112 Leadership Development Project Report (Level 7) - Analyse and evaluate how the project has been planned and managed, including the extent to which the aims and objectives have been met.

These two modules will enable you to:

- capture and distil critical learning incidents from career and programme to date.
- report on an organisational intervention to demonstrate the transfer of learning, increased leadership capability and organisational impact.
- achieve a University post graduate qualification as evidence of increased capability.

- ✓ **On line resources** - On line support will be provided throughout the programme offering a range of learning resources and helping participants to navigate assessment guidelines and requirements with links to appropriate learning material.

What are the Benefits and Development routes from this programme?

The Postgraduate Certificate in Leadership & Management programme aims to:

- ✓ Equips you with the knowledge, skills and competence to a level where you can make a professional and strategic contribution to leadership and management in the organisation.
- ✓ Provide core business subjects relevant to leading and managing in business.
- ✓ The academic credits from the programme can be transferred through Accreditation of Prior Learning within the university's post-graduation framework such as the Masters in Professional Practice.

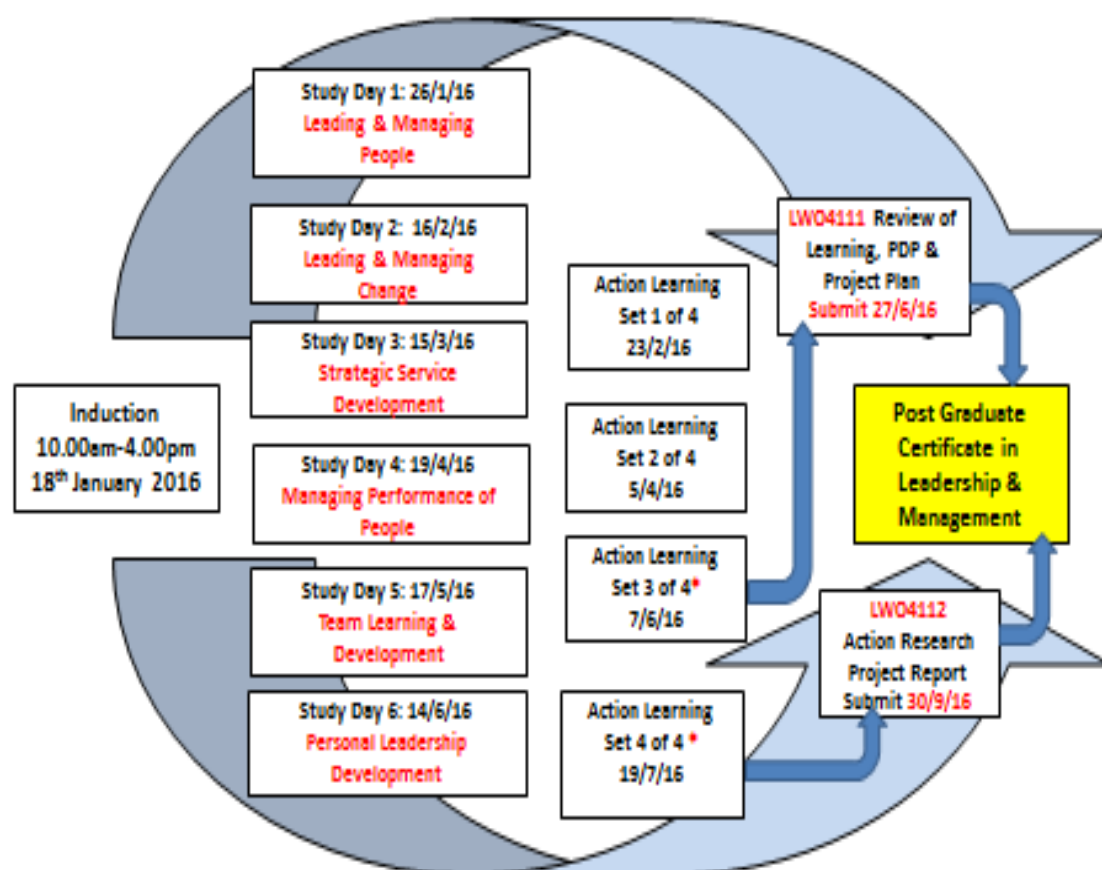
How much release time do I need to discuss with my manager?

Release time needs to be agreed between yourself and your manager. Usual practice would be to allow release for all the taught elements and action learning sets, and limited time to prepare for each module assignment. As this is a fully funded programme, you will also need to commit your own time to reading around the subjects and assignment preparation.

What is the time line of the programme?

The proposed programme is presented below:

Leadership and Management Development Programme PG Certificate in Leadership & Management 2016



Appendix 2

Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management
Barnet Enfield Haringey Mental Health Trust.

Action Learning Sets

Dates: 23/2/16, 5/4/16, 7/6/16, 19/7/16

Set A	
Time: 9.30am to 1.00pm	
Room: Meeting room 1, Orchard House, St Ann's Hospital	
Facilitator: C S	
1.	C D
2.	A G
3.	D H
4.	L O
5.	T E

Set B	
Time: 1.30pm to 5.00pm	
Room: Meeting room 1, Orchard House, St Ann's Hospital	
Facilitator: A N	
1.	M S-S
2.	Y A
3.	S MC
4.	H V
5.	FA-A

Set C	
Time: 9.30pm to 1.00pm	
Room: Lincoln Room, Chase Farm Hospital	
Facilitator: M H	
1.	I S
2.	A G
3.	A H
4.	J F-E
5.	L H

Appendix 3



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CORE FACILITATOR COMPETENCIES

BACKGROUND

The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) is the worldwide professional body established to promote, support and advance the art and practice of professional facilitation through methods exchange, professional growth, practical research and collegial networking.

The Core Facilitator Competencies framework was developed over several years by the IAF with the support of its members and facilitators from all over the world. The competencies form the basic set of skills, knowledge, and behaviours that facilitators must have in order to be successful facilitating in a wide variety of environments.

In response to the needs of members and their clients, IAF also established the IAF Certified™ Professional Facilitator (CPF) designation. The CPF provides successful candidates with the professional credential IAF Certified™ Professional Facilitator. This credential is the leading indicator that a facilitator is competent in each of the core facilitator competencies.

THE CORE COMPETENCIES

A. CREATE COLLABORATIVE CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

A1) Develop working partnerships • Clarify mutual commitment • Develop consensus on tasks, deliverables, roles & responsibilities • Demonstrate collaborative values and processes such as in co-facilitation.

A2) Design and customise applications to meet client needs • Analyse organisational environment • Diagnose client need • Create appropriate designs to achieve intended outcomes • Predefine a quality product & outcomes with client.

A3) Manage multi-session events effectively • Contract with client for scope and deliverables • Develop event plan • Deliver event successfully • Assess/evaluate client satisfaction at all stages of the event or project.

B. PLAN APPROPRIATE GROUP PROCESSES

B1) Select clear methods and processes that: • Foster open participation with respect for client culture, norms and participant diversity • Engage the participation of those with varied learning or thinking styles • Achieve a high quality product or outcome that meets the client needs.

B2) Prepare time and space to support group process • Arrange physical space to support the purpose of the meeting • Plan effective use of time • Provide effective atmosphere and drama for sessions.

C. CREATE AND SUSTAIN A PARTICIPATORY ENVIRONMENT

C1) Demonstrate effective participatory and interpersonal communication skills • Apply a variety of participatory processes • Demonstrate effective verbal communication skills • Develop rapport with participants • Practice active listening • Demonstrate ability to observe and provide feedback to participants.

C2) Honour and recognise diversity, ensuring inclusiveness • Encourage positive regard for the experience and perception of all participants • Create a climate of safety and trust • Create opportunities for participants to benefit from the diversity of the group • Cultivate cultural awareness and sensitivity.

C3) Manage group conflict • Help individuals identify and review underlying assumptions • Recognise conflict and its role within group learning/maturity • Provide a safe environment for conflict to surface • Manage disruptive group behaviour • Support the group through resolution of conflict.

C4) Evoke group creativity • Draw out participants of all learning/thinking styles • Encourage creative thinking • Accept all ideas • Use approaches that best fit needs and abilities of the group • Stimulate and tap group energy.

D. GUIDE GROUP TO APPROPRIATE AND USEFUL OUTCOMES

D1) Guide the group with clear methods and processes • Establish clear context for the session • Actively listen, question and summarise to elicit the sense of the group • Recognise tangents and redirect to the task • Manage small and large group process.

D2) Facilitate group self-awareness about its task • Vary the pace of activities according to needs of group • Identify information the group needs, and draw out data and insight from the group • Help the group synthesise patterns, trends, root causes, frameworks for action • Assist the group in reflection on its experience.

D3) Guide the group to consensus and desired outcomes • Use a variety of approaches to achieve group consensus • Use a variety of approaches to meet group objectives • Adapt processes to changing situations and needs of the group • Assess and communicate group progress • Foster task completion.

E. BUILD AND MAINTAIN PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

E1) Maintain a base of knowledge • Be knowledgeable in management, organisational systems and development, group development, psychology, and conflict resolution • Understand dynamics of change • Understand learning/ thinking theory.

E2) Know a range of facilitation methods • Understand problem solving and decision-making models • Understand a variety of group methods and techniques • Know consequences of misuse of group methods • Distinguish process from task and content • Learn new processes, methods, & models in support of client's changing/emerging needs.

E3) Maintain professional standing • Engage in ongoing study/learning related to our field • Continuously gain awareness of new information in our profession • Practice reflection and learning • Build personal industry knowledge and networks • Maintain certification.

F. MODEL POSITIVE PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE

F1) Practice self-assessment and self-awareness • Reflect on behaviour and results • Maintain congruence between actions and personal and professional values • Modify personal behaviour / style to reflect the needs of the group • Cultivate understanding of one's own values and their potential impact on work with clients.

F2) Act with integrity • Demonstrate a belief in the group and its possibilities • Approach situations with authenticity and a positive attitude • Describe situations as facilitator sees them and inquire into different views • Model professional boundaries and ethics (as described in the IAF's Statement of Values and Code of Ethics).

F3) Trust group potential and model neutrality • Honour the wisdom of the group • Encourage trust in the capacity and experience of others • Vigilant to minimise influence on group outcomes • Maintain an objective, non-defensive, non-judgmental stance.

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Appendix 4

Research Ethics - Participant Information Sheet

Research Project: Evaluation of the impact of action learning and integration of mindfulness into leadership development to enhance managerial leaders' capacity for self-care and resilience: The Case of Public Sector Leadership and Management Development in the UK.

Background

As a participant on the in Barnet Enfield Haringey Mental Health Trust Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management, you are being invited to share your experiences in this research study on Action Learning and mindfulness as a management development process. Please take time to read the following information carefully to understand what this will involve. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

Research has placed the business-wide return on investment from action learning as anywhere from 5 to 25 times its cost. However there is little empirical research or evidence on why and how action learning works. Similarly, mindfulness is increasingly referred to in the organisation literature, however, there remains a dearth of studies investigating workplace mindfulness or linking mindfulness explicitly to individual reflective practice, self-care and resilience. Therefore, there is a need for further research in these areas of leadership development. Consequently, our research seeks to contribute to theory building in these areas and present empirical evidence of the impact of such interventions on leadership development. The research on mindfulness will be conducted in collaboration with Dr Clare Rigg, University of Liverpool.

Who has reviewed the study?

The project has been reviewed by Middlesex University and the Learning and Development Manager in Barnet Enfield Haringey Mental Health Trust (BEH MHT). It will also been submitted to the Middlesex University Ethics Committee for approval.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen as you have or will be a participant on the Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management sponsored by BEH MHT and delivered by Middlesex University.

One of the components of this programme is your participation in Action Learning sets and therefore we want to seek your views on your experience to inform our research.

What does participation in the study involve?

As a participant on the programme, your contribution to the evaluation process of this programme will provide a valuable and reliable source of information for our research. Additionally, you may be required to take part in a short interview about your experiences on the programme. The interview should take no more than 45 minutes of your time and can be done at a time and place of your choosing. The interview seeks to explore your views about how key elements of programme such as action learning and the practice of mindfulness worked within the Leadership Development programme.

Research quality

In keeping with *University Code of Conduct for Research*, the research will be carried out to ensure the ‘highest standards of integrity’ in terms of performance and ethical conduct (section 1.1). This means that any data remains **confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this research** (including all data and documentation that is not in the public domain, and any informal discussions that take place). To maintain anonymity, **individual respondent’s names or any identifying details will not be made available in any publication or to any other organisation or individual**, and any reference made to individual participants will be via numeric reference to the interview number and broadly by job responsibilities (e.g. senior/middle/ manager, team lead). Please also note that all those involved in the study have the right to request that anything they regard as sensitive or confidential (verbal or written) be excluded from the study. Finally, all data will be stored in accordance with the University guidelines, guidance from the Research Council’s UK, and *Data Protection Act*. This ensures the secure storage of all data in its original form for a period of 10 years (or up to 20 years where data is of major social, environmental or heritage importance).

Any raising concerns

If you have any concerns about the research you should contact the principal investigator in the first instance who will be happy to discuss your concerns. Should you wish to make a formal complaint, you will be directed to the relevant person within the University. Also as a participant, you can request to withdraw from the study at any time up until (TBC). Any request to withdraw from the research should be put in writing to a member of the research team; the contact details to be provided. Following your withdrawal from the study, any information you

have already provided will not be used in the analysis or final report, and any record of the data you have provided will subsequently be destroyed.

Feedback and dissemination

We will feed back results of the project to the Learning and Development Lead in BEHMHT. This will take the form of an evaluation report on the Post Graduate Programme. The researchers plan to publish academic papers in peer reviewed journal detailing the findings of this study.

Contact for further information

If you have any queries or concerns regarding the project or would like to discuss your participation in more detail, please contact:

Chandana Sanyal
Senior Lecturer
Middlesex Business School
Middlesex University
Dept of Leadership, Work and Organisations, Room W121
Middlesex University, Hendon Campus
The Burroughs
London
NW4 4BT

Email: c.sanyal@mdx.ac.uk

Appendix 5

Research Ethics - Participant Information Sheet

Research Project:

Evaluation of the impact of action learning and integration of mindfulness into leadership development to enhance managerial leaders' capacity for self-care and resilience: The Case of Public Sector Leadership and Management Development in the UK.

- I the undersigned agree to take part in the study on 'Evaluation of the impact of action learning and integration of mindfulness into leadership development to enhance managerial leaders' capacity for self-care and resilience' which is being undertaken by Middlesex University. ☐
- I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet provided. I have been given a full explanation by the investigators of the nature, purpose, location, and of what I will be expected to do. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions on all aspects of the study and have understood and information given as a result. ☐
- I understand that data for this research will be collected as a part of the evaluation process within the programme and that I may be requested to participate in a one-to-one interview. ☐
- I agree to my work being used to evidence my learning both at an individual and organizational level. ☐
- I understand that any information which is collected during interviews will be stored in line with the University's strict guidelines, which protects the secure storage of all data in its original form for a period of 10 years. ☐
- I am free to withdraw from the interview at any time without needing to justify my decision. If I withdraw from the interview, I understand that my data will not be used. ☐

- In the event of needing to complain, I understand that I should contact Chandana Sanyal at Middlesex University (c.sanyal@mdx.ac.uk) ☐
- I confirm that I have read and understood all of the above and freely consent to taking part in this study. I have been given enough time to consider whether I want to take part and agree to comply with the requirements of study. ☐

Name of
volunteer
(BLOCK
CAPITALS)

Signed

Date

Name of
researcher/person
taking consent
(BLOCK
CAPITALS)

Signed

Date

Appendix 6

RESEARCH AGREEMENT FOR PUBLICATION & AUTHORSHIP

Use of data and co-authorship agreement on Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health Trust (BEH MHT) Action Learning group reflection transcriptions.

Purpose: The aim of this agreement is to establish clarity and seek agreement on the use of data and authorship with Action Learning Facilitators on the Barnet Enfield Haringey Mental Health Trust leadership programme for Chandana Sanyal's doctoral studies on *'The Pedagogy of Action Learning - a critique of the role of the facilitator in an organisational leadership programme'* and future publications for all BEH MHT Action Learning facilitators.

1. **Common Data set** - The BEH MHT Action Learning Facilitators' group reflection transcriptions are a collective research data set for the facilitators.
2. **Authorship and publication** – The BEH MHT Action Learning Facilitators' data set can be drawn on for publication outputs both individually as sole authors and/or as one or more co-authors within this group.
3. **Communication and courtesy** – The BEH MHT Action Learning Facilitators will discuss, share and agree 'ideas' for potential publication outputs within the group and keep each other updated on publication progress and final outcomes.
4. **Middlesex University's Research Ethics Policy** - The BEH MHT Action Learning Facilitators will take the necessary action to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the data at all times in line with the University's Research Ethics Policy.

I agree with the above and give my consent.

BEH MHT Action Learning Facilitators:

- | | | |
|------------------------------|------------|-------|
| 1. Chandana Sanyal | Signature: | Date: |
| 2. Chris Rigby | Signature: | Date: |
| 3. Dr Mary Hartog | Signature: | Date: |
| 4. Dr Alyson Nicholds | Signature: | Date: |

Appendix 7

ACTION LEARNING

Handout of Participants

Process and Roles

This sheet summarises the Action Learning Set (ALS) process, the responsibilities of the ALS members and the role and responsibilities of the facilitator.

The Action Learning Set Process: Key Characteristics

Action Learning was developed as an approach specifically for developing managers by Reg Revans, originally an experimental physicist, following his experience in the Second World War. Revans' view was that '...learning is *a social process* in which managers who are faced with real life **messy** problems will learn best with and from others'. In its time it was regarded as revolutionary as it challenged the traditional role of the teacher/instructor as the 'expert'.

1. A work problem/issue is at the centre of the process. This should be a real-life, work-based problem. It should also be a significant problem, one that you feel you are 'grappling with'.
2. It is a social process, e.g. it involves working with/alongside peers. These peers can be regarded as 'comrades in adversity' (Revans) or 'comrades in opportunity' (Weinstein).
3. At the forefront is the *process* of learning (your own personal and professional development). The work-based project (*task*) is the vehicle to demonstrate learning.

The Role of the ALS Members

1. **Skills:** ALS members help each other. The first part is through active and deep listening. This then enables peers to ask informed questions to promote informed thinking and in turn informed action. Three interrelated processes are central to Action Learning:
 - ***Reflection:*** each member is encouraged, by the comments and questions of their peers, to make their thinking clear (explicit). Members begin to *think about their thinking*.
 - ***Inquiry:*** each member helps their peers by seeking supporting (empathising) and challenging via innocent (dumb?) questions as well as probing questions to illicit clarity. "Questions aren't seeking answers; they are an opportunity to explain".
 - ***Advocacy:*** each member is encouraged to put forward their plans and make their thinking and reasons explicit, e.g. 'this is what I think and this is why.'
2. **Responsibility:** The individual has responsibility for and owns the problem throughout – peers do not take over the problem.

3. **Commitment:** It is the responsibility of members to help peers to improve and learn. Each member must be equally committed to the learning of their peers as much as their own.
4. **'Chatham House' rules apply:** This means that people are allowed to speak as individuals and to express views that may not be those of their organizations, and therefore, encourages free discussion. Speakers are free to voice their own opinions, without concern for their personal reputation or their official duties and affiliations. The key point is that neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

The Facilitator's Responsibilities

1. To ensure time is well spent and adds value.
2. To ensure all members have equal participation.
3. **To ensure that the 'process' of learning is kept at the forefront and that the 'task' (the project) flows from the process and not allow emphasis on task to impede sustained learning & development.**
4. To create an environment for ongoing, sustained learning in which members feel safe and can trust.
5. To help develop clarity of purpose – what is realistic, possible, feasible.

Processes underpinning each action learning set

1. **Airspace:** Each member is given time (usually equal time) at every meeting to present their issue and be the centre of others' undivided attention.
2. **Questions:** These are central to the way the set works. Revans was fond of saying "We only begin to learn when we become aware of what we don't know".
3. **Listen actively:** Each participant should not just 'hear what is being said but pay close attention, listen to not just the words but what the person 'inside' is striving to put into words.
4. **Focus on learning and changing:** By following through reflective cycles of learning the aim is that each member of the set moves to a new place in what we do, think and say.
5. **Reflecting:** Operates in two ways: One is reflecting back to others what they say so that they can reflect on it; the other way is each person reflecting on their own experience.

6. **Silence:** Sets must tolerate periods of silence which can be uncomfortable but also a source of reflection and renewal.
7. **No judgment, no advice, no solution:** Like coaching, the aim is to help members see different options and arrive at their own solutions.
8. **Finding a formula to share ideas and insights:** But there will be times when individuals want to give advice in which case the set should agree a way this should be done. For example by prefacing advice by first asking if this would be helpful.

Model of Action Learning

(<http://www.cln.nhs.uk/aboutcln/action-learning.html>)



Appendix 8

From: Alyson Nicholds
Sent: 22 February 2016 12:22
To: Chandana Sanyal; Mary Hartog
Subject: RE: Revised handouts for 1st ALS

Hi both,

Thanks Chandana – these look excellent - I've printed them all out as handouts for tomorrow's session.

Hope you're feeling better by now Mary – David had a similar virus last week and I think I'm getting it now ☐!

See you both next week.

Alyson

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a.nicholds@mdx.ac.uk

From: Chandana Sanyal
Sent: 15 February 2016 17:26
To: Mary Hartog; Alyson Nicholds
Subject: Revised handouts for 1st ALS

Dear Mary & Alyson

Here are the revised handouts for the 1st AL session. Please print them for your session.

Thanks for your input into this.

Chandana

Chandana Sanyal

Senior Lecturer, Business School

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Appendix 9

Extracts from personal reflection notes

'I try my best to always think about the individual, step into their shoes, share their problem, but at the same time stay outside of it, so I can facilitate the learning process without getting too involved in their problem...I have to manage my own sense-making while helping them to gain new insights, resolving real problems'.

'I then proceeded to explain the structure of the session, the processes involved and went through the handout on Introduction to AL, offering opportunity for questions/ clarification throughout. I explained that we would start and end with check-in & Check-out and each member would have approximately 30 minutes of 'airspace' to put forward their individual challenges/ issues'

'We discussed expectations and responsibility of AL members and myself as the facilitator. Several questions came up – will we be discussing the 'assignments', how is it different to team meetings/handovers/group supervision and how will I facilitate? I felt confident in responding to these questions as I was very clear about the purpose of the action learning sessions within the Leadership programme'.

'I feel that I was able to explain the purpose and process of AL in the context of their leadership programme quite clearly at this stage'.

'I found myself listening actively and did not feel the need to ask questions myself as I saw that there was great expertise on the subject in the room. All 4 members were actively listened and asked open questions...I managed the process by rephrasing, summarising key points made...to encourage LO [the AL member] to gather her thinking, I asked if she has some options/ideas to consider from the process? What will she do next? How would she gain support from others?

'CD [another manager] had concerns over one of her team members. Initial discussions confirmed that this was a challenging situation and that the manager was doing everything right so far. Two of the action learning members had lots of expertise in this area; some excellent 'advocacy' was offered which gave her 2/3 other avenues to consider. I managed the process by listening and encouraging open discussion...asking questions such as 'Is this something you can consider'? 'How do you feel about this now?'

'As there are several clinicians in the group a lots of excellent probing questions were asked and I mainly facilitated the process by listening and ensuring that everyone including LO[the AL member] who had raised the issues was fully engaged'.

'AG put forward her situation where she felt that her relationship with her line manager has completed broken down in the last few months...She shared her perspectives in response to questions from her group members and this continued for a while. After the first 10/15 minutes or so I found my body position change, I came forward in my chair, offering an indication to be more directly involved in the questioning as the conversation was becoming repetitive and not getting anywhere. I asked questions such as, how do you feel about your manager? and got a direct response I don't like her! I then asked, is there anything you want to change about this situation? She felt it was not worth it. The strong emotions were clear. Here, my thinking as well as my feeling was that by sharing my own experience I may be able to create a space of mutual experience, I asked permission if I could share my own experience and then briefly explained my own experience...and how I decided to change my approach to the situation as I was not in a position to change how the other person behaved and also had a meeting which I prepared for with a helpful colleague to put my points across. She seems to relate to this and then I asked her what advice she would give me if I was in her situation. I believe this finally made her reflect and she decide to consider having a meeting with her manager rather than leave things as they are...In the next session she had reflected on last session's discussion and started to change approach...she is been pleasant to her manager and had similar response back'.

'In the last session she feedback that she had changed her attitude towards her manager, she is no longer paranoid and confrontational. She now reflects on what she would do if she was in her manager's situation; how could she manage better? She is civil to her manager and don't give her a hard time anymore; rather show compassion...'.

'DH talked her current line manager and workload, changes in her role, lack of appraisal targets and her disappointment in not being successful in a couple of internal promotion applications I observed that the AL members asked a few clarifying questions during this time but...she story was flowing out, moving from one aspect of her concern to another. In aiming to manage the process on this occasion I offered to summarise in an attempt to bring clarity to the context. I suggested that as I saw it there were 2 key areas for consideration...'

'DH [the AL member] realises that she is very demotivated at the moment...I asked her what she knows now that she had not considered previously...the air space was used to help her to

take a step back to enable her to *think through* the overall aim of her project and objectives for the organisation and also for her own development. She has realised that it is important to be positive; her awareness of things around her has increased, she said she is more observant’.

‘I suggested that she put herself in the centre of her project and then re-value the outcomes she wants. This helped her to consider her own development...and how this may impact on options/opportunities for extending her practice. AG was able to *consider her options and reframe* her objectives accordingly’.

‘I felt that the members had *established trust* in the group to be able to help [each other] to *critically reflect* on their thoughts and feelings’.

‘I was a little apprehensive about how the AL members’ would react to the planned AL processes...I had some concerns about how it would be received but surprising all 5 participants embraced...As my action learning practice has been to always have an open circle, with AL members sitting around in chairs in a small circle this felt ‘different’. I had to let go off my slight uneasiness as I decided to go with the group’s choice’.

‘I observed from this update that all AL members had taken some action ...It was also obvious that the AL members were keen to know what had happened, they *asked questions*, *sought clarification* and encouraged each other in their achievements. I felt that both *learning* and some *actions* had been achieved’

Appendix 10

Extracts from group reflective gathering

The planned AL structure was used by all the facilitators; we used the hand-out on AL to set the scene for the sessions.

‘the power of the process that makes it work’; ‘I did say a little bit at the beginning about the process...I went over ground rules and through the pages [of the handout]’; ‘I wanted to set the scene of respect, of learning, of reflection, of not overly problem solving...I thought more about the process this time as well...’ (AL facilitator 2).

The purpose of the AL was also considered to be very important and needed to be clearly communicated to the AL members; this message was given to AL members:

‘The context is the organisation and their project, but the actual programme is about them, their professional practice and in particular, their leadership practice’.

There was also acknowledgement that *‘this was enough structure’* and that we would not want to make it more prescriptive.

‘Effectively you introduce the process, just getting the right amount of process in and then letting them get on with it.

‘work with what is in the room’...we may have a structure, we might have to move slightly in a different way, because you can’t ignore those emotions, whereas this may not be the case in each AL set’ (AL facilitator 2).

Lack of time keeping was an issues within some AL sets. This has impact on facilitation:

‘...in terms of how I felt, I felt quite rushed for time because people hadn’t arrived on time, I felt a little bit pressured to get in everything, both the, if you like, instructional activity around what an action learning set was and the check in process and things didn’t quite go in the order I would have planned it, I couldn’t go straight into a mindfulness exercise as everyone had not arrived... so I’ve ended up being guided by where they’re at and I have, you know, I’ve worried at times, am I letting this drift too far...so I try and hold the rein a little in that regard, but I have let it kind of just unfold much more’ (AL facilitator 2).

‘I felt that I tried to manage the space a lot more this time than I’ve done before, because I was determined actually that, you know, there was a great lack of respect last time, I think, in the

process and for me and so I worked hard to try and manage that more this time' (AL facilitator 3).

We all expressed some anxiety and uncertainty with administering the mindfulness exercises as we were not very experienced in meditation or mindfulness, although some of us had some previous involvement. One of the facilitator summarised our thinking:

'to become competent, you've got to sometimes go through conscious incompetence, then it's still a conscious effort but you're better at it, so you're consciously competent and then it just seems as though it's a very skilled facilitation of something that you come across as being good at yourself and therefore you're almost a role model to those who are in the room, that they can go through those steps...[of the mindfulness practice]' (AL facilitator 1).

The feedback from the participants was overwhelmingly positive; only one of the 15 participants did not engage with it.

'They engaged with it, they benefited from it, it made a huge difference actually to the feel of the set, and so I'm really glad you introduced it. They all said afterwards...[they] don't get any time for this normally and I think actually what the mindfulness did was it gave them permission to be here, you now have three or four hours to yourselves, I think the mindfulness honoured that...it was really lovely' (AL facilitator 3).

'Most people seemed very relaxed, everybody was sat on a chair, a number of people had their hands on their knees and there was this sort of, you know, feedback afterwards because I asked, you know, how was it for you, how did you find that and so, yeah. One person used the word difficult, one person said it was positive and somebody talked about the clock and how they were aware of the clock and the birds and they hadn't been aware of that before, so I thought that was quite a nice start...' (AL facilitator 2).

'In my set, they found that really useful, some have already started using it in practice, as in, one of them said, she was really stressed out and she tried to calm herself down and actually realised that she didn't have to do it all, so it really helped to kind of position themselves in the present...another person who had been quiet critical, she said that this is something that she's not only embraced fully earlier, but she is now using it in her clinical sessions with her clients...' (AL facilitator 4).

The effect of the mindfulness exercises before the 'check-in' within the AL process was apparent to all of us in the GRG.

'I think that is the impact of giving them the mindful space, that's what I notice, because yes, some of them are having a really difficult time, they said, yes...I've had a difficult day and I'll talk about it in my space but I'm okay and I'm really glad to be here, I've accepted that my work is always going to be like this, , that kind of thing, so I think immediate impact is great' (AL facilitator 4).

The AL facilitator noted that AL member who found the mindful exercises difficult that he had shared that *'there's never silence where he works and that he always has a radio on and he can't cope with silence and I just thought, well, that's really interesting...'*; she also noted that another member who was going through a challenging situation at work was able to find *'this quietness within herself'* in spite of lots of noise from the building site outside their room.

Another observation in the group was that not everyone was at the same threshold of their readiness to learn.

'I don't think she was quite ready, I think she needed to be heard and she needed someone to understand her from her point of view' (AL facilitator 3).

'I think initially she didn't find it easy and I think it took quite a bit of feedback from the group and myself to enable her to acknowledge how much work she had done, because she knew she'd done a good job and this theme of not being recognised and valued for your contributions came up..... she seemed to be struggling then with how she was going to position herself going forward, so there was a fear and an anxiety moving forward...' (AL facilitator 2).

'This question of readiness to learn is an important consideration for the facilitator...how we help them to shift from just describing the story, to thinking much more reflectively and reflexively about what it is they're doing and what is in the nature of the problems that they're presenting' (AL facilitator 1).

There was unanimous agreement that our role as facilitators was to 'organise reflections' of the AL members

'I found it remarkably easy actually to invite them to reflect on what they were grappling with in their work...I think in the first instance, I could see that I and the other participants were trying to listen very carefully to our first presenter and what worked really well actually was that the other participants asked some very good questions, which helped...her think about how

she might be framing stuff and indeed, perhaps challenged her to think [reframe] about..., for example, what [the situation] might look like...'

*'Our job in an action learning set, is that we **organise reflection**, so that it's not just the individuals, but together as a group they are learning and it's a different process'.*

This was also evidence from group ownership of problems discussed and empathy shown within the process:

'As the relationship between them developed, you know, they created a relationship with each other and therefore the problem was a group problem now, so what has happened, so I hadn't really observed that so significantly before but it was very obvious in this one'.

Active listening was identified as an essential skill within the AL process.

*'You're trying very hard to **listen actively**, but most importantly, well, you know, to how they're feeling....., to actually what's going on, you know, the actual thing that they're talking about is not that clear sometimes... '.*

It was also observed that the AL group members asked some excellent questions and as facilitators we also asked some open, probing questions, such as:

*'We did try and be **supportive in questions** like: What are your expectations? What do you need, what would having control look like? Where do you get your energy/how does this make you feel? What do you think happened? What could have contributed to this?'*

It was observed that the AL members were making sense of their experience and some started to shape their identity as a manager through the AL conversations.

*'Because they had **made sense** of the stories they were sharing in the learning set and that in itself was helping them begin to position and identify what it means for them' (AL facilitator 1).*

*'It's helping them to **position themselves**, where they are, so that **reshaping** is happening because they are in a space where they have to relate theory to practice, they just don't have to be in a session with this topic covered and go away and then be a manager and then come back and do another session and then do the assignment...in the action learning set they're having the space to shape themselves as lead managers...so all of them are having to relate theory to practice' (AL facilitator 4).*

*‘An AL member who was initially in a place of non-learning was able to make sense of what was going on for her as she allowed herself to **reframe the situation**, consider other aspect influencing the situation which she had not considered before’ (AL facilitator 4).*

Throughout the GRG discussions there was a clear thread of what we as facilitators did to create this space for learning both for ourselves and the AL members. This was expressed in different ways:

‘I arrived before everybody else and get the room ready.....one of my participants then arrived fairly early and that was kind of nice just to, you know, just to sort of get bedded into the room, I think. I have a need as a facilitator to sort of feel comfortable in the space....my own self-awareness of what I am doing & why’ (AL facilitator 3).

*‘as they begun to **share**...I gave them the language...I said, you know, Revans talks about comrades in adversity, this idea that now you can see that you're all in the same boat or in a similar boat and that seemed to help them let their guard down even more’ (AL facilitator 2).*

*‘how do we as facilitators contribute to the **creation of that place of safety**, so yes, we've got rules like, rules around confidentiality and Chatham House rules and all that sort of thing, but I think one of the things we're doing as facilitators is also noticing, so you know, it is very much presence and in the moment and feeding back that reinforcing message, which was why I found myself doing it two or three times, so that it almost kind of helped embed that, what would otherwise may be subconscious awareness’.*

*‘They have become **very open with one another and** they are sharing aspects of their experience that they wouldn't have shared beforehand. Now, whether that's the **action learning set container** that enables that and or whether the mindfulness exercises is enabling that, I'm not very sure, but what I became aware of, there was a common thread running through the comments from everybody that they appreciate this space...a space to **think, time to reflect, time for a bit of self-care**’.*

‘I remember one particular comment, I feel really safe to share, I have put it down to mindfulness’.

The mindfulness exercises appear to have contributed to creating safe space for learning.

‘She said that speaking and articulating what's going on has helped me and she said she didn't know what had happened to her in the time of that session but she thinks that she'd been different at work as a result and that nothing had been done by her, nothing had been said by

her...For her, that space had actually resulted in her feeling better about the situation. She hadn't done anything but now she thought about it differently and this had helped her...'

'people brought very real problems to the session that they want, you could see they valued the space, there was trust and a relational process, you know, relationships had been built and they actually valued having the opportunity to talk about it....for some of them, it's just articulating...'

The GRG discussions highlighted that the nature of the problem and the nature of sharing within the AL groups varied.

'In the context of this last person being shift leader...it got into descriptive, problem solving, advice giving because it was a regulatory matter and safely was raise as a concern...I felt hugely protective of this person and I had to kind of, like, you know, sit back and think...it was the first time she'd shared, the first time she'd told anybody, which I thought was quite nice for this group because she's got some time now with the rest of the participants to offload and share I felt myself kind of feeling more nurturing of her...I think my concern for her, as it would be for anybody where there's a kind of legal or regulatory issue, is managing that situation properly...The one thing I did was intervene and I said you need some time to think...' (AL facilitator 3).

Other examples of a more direct approach was when the issue was complex, the AL members had exhausted their questioning and the AL member appeared to be either stuck and going on and on...Here, it was acknowledged that trusting our professional judgement was very important in deciding when to intervene more directly or offer gentle guidance.

I think that instinct comes from a place of professionalism, but it's not necessarily to say that you shouldn't do it in an action learning context because you are there, I suppose it boils down to, are you there as a facilitator, to remain silent and somewhat detached and peripheral, or are you there actively listening and I suppose it's our role to do both...' (AL facilitator 2).

'I think that is really vital to this sort of work because what we're trying to do is create and build learning relationships...yes, we're containing that, we're part of that process, we're not entirely separate from it and I think being selective in terms of the connected nature of the relationship is really important'(AL facilitator 2).

There were also instances when less was more, i.e. being less directive and allowing the conversations to emerge worked well.

'I found myself really comfortable not saying much...I felt there were such wonderful questions being asked and also, if you like, advocacy being offered, not necessarily telling them what to do, but because they were clinical issues...for example have you thought of this service, have you considered this? So all I did was summarise and say, so is this making sense to you? What are your options now? (AL facilitator 4).

'there was a silence and previously I'd have stepped in and I just thought, no, leave it, if somebody wants to go next, they can go next,...I was thinking, should I be saying something and then somebody said...so that was nice for me to sit back...because I sat back more, meant that the session was better actually and I think they owned it more' (AL facilitator 3).

'these conversations are iterative conversations and in my experience, they come back one way or another, but we end up revisiting the same stuff, time and again, until they either shift or are resolved...' (AL facilitator 2)

'discipline of noticing, being sufficiently skilled and sufficiently in the room and in the space with the individual concerned and also not just listening and watching the individual but being alive to what's going on in your own head inside and having the question, you know, what is it that I need to do or say or ask, if anything, might be physical, it might be facial or it might be a sentence, that's going to help me understand, you know, where this person's stuck' (AL facilitator 2).

Appendix 11

Evaluation of programme questionnaire

The programme evaluation of the MHT Post Graduate programme, Cohort 3 consisted of a pre and post evaluation questionnaire and a focus group.

Evaluation questionnaire

There was a specific question on the action learning element of the programme. Overall, over 90% of the participants confirmed that the **AL sessions supported their learning and leadership development**. In terms of suggested improvement to the sessions, there was request for increasing the number of AL sessions.

Did the Action Learning Set sessions support your learning and practice development?

Yes – 92%

No - 0%

Not fully – 8%

Participant comments:

*'A safe space to **reflect** on leadership practices'*

'thinking about & resolving messy problems'

*'**open non-judgemental space to talk**'*

*'**mindfulness practice was very useful**'*

*'listening to **open, honest, discussions**/experiences very helpful'*

*'able to think differently about situations at work, **reflect & generate solutions**'*

'felt I was listened to...'

'learnt to listen and ask exploratory questions'.

A set of self-assessment statements were used to assessment personal and organisational impact which show that participants there was substantial increase in the following areas:

Personal Impact - selected statements presented in % increase to demonstrate impact

Coping when things have not worked as hoped	– up to 60%
Leading/ supporting people with compassion	– up to 60%
Ability to keep calm & show resilience in managing work pressures	– up to 60%
Listening to staff	– up to 60%

Confidence in managing email responses	– up to 60%
Dealing with anxiety	– up to 40%
Engage in difficult work conversation	– up to 40%
Ability to create quiet moments within working day	– up to 40%

Organisational Impact – BEH MHT’s Organisational Development Strategy (CIRCLE)

Competence and capability	– up to 50%
Innovative and learning culture	– up to 60%
Roles and responsibilities	– up to 60%
Compassionate and high	– up to 60%

Appendix 12

BEH MHT Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management

Programme evaluation - 2016 (Cohort 3)

This is a brief summary of the post-programme evaluation of the MHT Post Graduate programme, Cohort 3. The programme started in January 2016 and will be completed the end of October 2016 when final assessment work is submitted. The 15 BEH MHT staff who participated in this programme were mainly in management roles either with direct line management responsibilities or with supervision and project involvement requiring people management capabilities, working at a range of different operational levels including clinical and non-clinical services. The evaluation consisted of a focus group and a post-evaluation questionnaire. 11 of the 15 participants attended the focus group and 13 of the 15 participants completed the questionnaire.

The evaluation summary is presented in four sections focusing on what is working well, current gaps, actions of change and organisational return.

What is working well?

Overall, feedback from the focus group and the questionnaire confirm that the programme has developed and enhanced management and leadership capabilities of the participants. The study day topics such as manager versus leader, leadership styles, leading and managing change, managing performance through feedback and empowerment, team learning and development were highlighted as particularly helpful to improve and enhance practice. Participants felt that the programme added value both of them and their organisational development. The comments below confirm this:

Participant comments:

'I feel more confident in my role as a leader'; 'understanding of different leadership styles'; 'more awareness of staff needs during change'; 'I am more conscious of my leadership style and its impact on my staff'; 'I have much more confidence in my ability'; 'my negotiation and delegation skills have improved'; 'it has opened my eyes to a more supportive style of management'; 'I have become more reflective and self-aware'; 'tune in more to emotional intelligence and political astuteness'; 'I now have the confidence to implement a large change management project to support service outcomes'; 'I am happier in my job and feel more confident in my role'; 'foundation gained for future leadership role in the NHS'; 'my development...will benefit the organisation's development towards becoming a less top-down and more engaged and supportive workplace'; 'increased the no. of people with formal training in leadership and management'.

The participant feedback and comments also confirmed that the Action Learning sessions supported their learning and practice development. All participants at the focus group requested that the number of the action learning sessions should be increased (suggestion of 4 to 6) as this provided a safe learning environment to reflect on their experience of leadership and management practices. The mindfulness exercises, which were introduced of the first time within the programme to support managers to learn about self-care and resilience was very well received. Participant comments on action learning and mindfulness demonstrate this:

Participant comments:

'Thinking about & resolving messy problems'; 'open non-judgemental space to talk'; 'mindfulness practice was very useful'; 'listening to open, honest, discussions/experiences very helpful'; 'think differently about situations at work, reflect & generate solutions'; 'felt I was listened to, learnt to question & listen and ask exploratory questions'.

'Taking the time out for mindfulness has helped my energy and improved my focus and concentration at work'; 'more aware of quality time for me and my staff'; 'more aware of my feelings and emotions and how this can impact on my work'; 'I will use it in training and forums to give people time to reflect'; 'it encouraged me to relax and I learnt how to focus more on what I do rather than worry'; 'helpful the mind of lots of other stuff and be fully engaged'; 'take a step back, do not react, listen to your thoughts'.

Appendix 13

MHT Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management

Focus group session, 7th September 2016

The findings from the focus group sessions are presented under each of the two exercises conducted. 11 of the 15 participants on the programme attended the focus group; there was a good representation from all three AL sets. Feedback from 3 of the 4 who did not attend was collated through the participant interviews at a later date.

Action Research using Appreciative Inquiry

Some of the examples of positive experience of AL shared within the groups were as follows:

- 1) Safe learning environment – small groups, people opened up more, honest, authentic, non-judgemental, confidential space to think
- 2) The facilitators encouraged listening, reflection and better understand of complex work situations
- 3) It provided opportunity to share and learn from others' experiences – able to share ideas, exchange organisational information, learn about new initiatives and develop networks
- 4) It provided an opportunity to understand the range of job roles and services in the Trust
- 5) Encouraged to think differently through the action learning process – look at situations from different perspectives
- 6) AL environment provided a 'safe' place to speak and share; being permitted to go on a meander/journey rather than straight line and quick results, offered containment
- 7) The space for reflection was valuable and rare; a very supportive process
- 8) Practice of mindfulness improved reflective and thinking skills
- 9) Practice of mindfulness enabled thinking about self-care and well-being
- 10) Able to say/discuss openly, support/input from AL members very helpful, on occasions painful/sad/difficult but very reflective and self-affirming, a more human approach
- 11) Provided direction and encouraged thinking, developed/ enhanced active listening skills, reflection-on-action

The emerging themes from the first exercise were as follows:

- AL sets were a supportive and safe learning forum
- A space for thinking and reflect supported by the AL process & mindfulness practice
- Reframing of challenges to consider multi-perspectives in work situations

Action Research using dialogue

The aim of this exercise was to capture data and validate outcomes within the group.

Each of the trigger questions related to the programme as the whole. Responses relating to action learning are shown below:

Question 1

Were any of content/ sessions of the programme not relevant to your learning and development?

‘I felt that the content and all sessions were relevant to my learning’.

‘I felt they were relevant’

‘AL was particularly helpful’.

Question. 2

Did you face any issues/challenges during the programme? If so, what were they?

The challenges related to ‘protected time’ for programme coursework, competing demands of balancing course with job responsibilities’ and challenges to completing the assignments.

There were no issues or challenges related to action learning.

Question 3

What improvements could be made for future implementation of the programme?

There were request for additional action learning sessions

‘4 action learning sessions not sufficient’

Suggestion was to increase these sessions from 4 to 6; this was requested by 6 of 11 participants

These key issues were validated by asking the following questions:

- Are there key issues on which everyone agrees?
- Are there key issues on which there is disagreement?

The **emerging themes** from this exercise which **the groups agreed** on were as follows:

- The AL sessions were particularly helpful
- There were no issues or challenges related to action learning.

The **emerging themes** from this exercise which **the groups did not fully** agree on were as follows:

- There was request to increase the number of AL sessions within the programme - 6 focus group members requested an increase from 4 to 6; the remaining 5 felt that 4 sessions were sufficient

Appendix 14

DProf topic: The Pedagogy of Action Learning - a critique of the role of the facilitator in an organisational leadership programme

Action Learning Participant semis structured interview questions

Q1: *How would you describe the role of the AL facilitator?*

What did you think they were doing?

What did the facilitator do that helped/ supported your learning?

Q2. *Did the facilitator have a particular style or approach?*

Were the sessions structured or open?

Can you give an example of the AL facilitator being directive/ structured in the sessions?

Can you give an example of the AL facilitator being open, i.e. less directive in the sessions?

Q3. *Where there any emotional moments/situations, particularly difficult ones, at the sessions?*

How were these facilitated? (Prompt: if not, how should these be facilitated?).

Q4. *Can you give an example of how the AL facilitator addressed any differences (of opinion/ ideas) or any conflict within your sessions?*

Did you feel supported/ listened to during such interventions?

Were you engaged in this?

Appendix 15

DProf topic: The Pedagogy of Action Learning - a critique of the role of the facilitator in an organisational leadership programme

AL facilitator interview questions:

- 1. What is your aim as an AL facilitator?*
- 2. What theories, models and techniques do you draw upon?*
- 3. If someone came into the room, what would they see you doing?*
- 4. What are the values that inform your role/practice?*
- 5. How did you address the participant's feelings /emotions during the sessions?*
- 6. How did you deal with your feelings /emotions during the sessions?*
- 7. How did you work with differences (differences in opinions, values, needs, experiences, expectations) during sessions?*

Appendix 16

Action Learning Participant interview transcripts

Fourteen AL participant interviews were conducted between December 2016 and February 2017.

Q1. How would you describe the role of the AL facilitator? What did you think they were doing? What did the facilitator do that helped/ supported your learning?

'The AL facilitator, I think/perceive is someone who teaches and also one who helps to facilitate discussion, facilitates us to think and reflect on certain issues that may have come up and asking a lot of open ended questions, very much geared towards helping us to reflect on certain issues which may come up such as work issues' (AL member 1).

'It helped my mind to focus, I was going through some problems, I did not think of it in that way, she made me think of it- she provided a platform for me to air, voice what was going on with me and others in the group' (AL member 2).

'The facilitator was really good and in order to me to learn she was quite boundaried in giving us our time, but the boundaries were not tight thought, they were quite loose. I think she was making it explicit about the reason why we were there...Instead of being solution focused, we had to explore the origins, like when we talked about the messy problem, she brought us back to focus... also there was a space offered for the others members in the AL set to contribute or ask us questions, so it was not just about her so we all fully participated in the AL set' (AL member 3).

'She was there to support us, not give us suggestions but lead and direct us in the right direction...She was observing us and seeing what issues we have and guided us ...promoted us' (AL member 4).

'It was important was to make sure that everybody got their turn, structured the session...she participated in a question herself, encouraging people to clarify a question, or reflect a bit further, she also reminder others that it is not about giving solutions but it is about helping someone to reflect on their own issues...she did the mindfulness at the beginning so that was

important to bring people at the same level. For me, she role modelled the way of asking questions or exploring issues...’ (AL member 5).

‘She would support and she was doing a lot of reflective structure, she was kind of containing... containing within the context, what I really liked it there was room for careful reflection. A space people could share, so that sense she was facilitating, it was a therapy intervention, both self-reflection and collective reflection’ (AL member 6).

‘She was listening and taking notes. She was asking reflective questions, but mainly she was listening....she also calm the person down and help her consider other possibilities’ (AL member 7).

‘I would describe her as a coach, a mentor. Someone who in a way is quite conscious of group dynamics and in a subtle way would steer without being intrusive. So in some ways guiding us when we got stuck but also allowing us to explore the issues but also contributing but not in an intrusive way but in a participating, equal way...she will give us some gentle advice or prompts to think and reflect about certain issues’ (AL member 8).

‘Professional, organised, had an agenda... listen to what people were saying. It made it quite informal and which I looked forward to going to. We were encouraged to think and reflect further’ (AL member 9).

‘She has a very calming effect/influence...she is very softly spoken. And maybe because of the people in the group, I am not really sure, we could be honest and open which was a big help...she encouraged openness as well our views, she followed a structure but was not rigid’ (AL member 10).

‘I have learnt from the mindfulness...It is actually very positive for me which I never knew before...It was reflective practice, recapping experiences...She directed our learning but allowed us to lead the talking, she gave us feedback. She helped us through discussion of our challenge which raised my self-awareness’ (AL member 11).

‘She was the co-ordinator, she set the process – the warm up, mindfulness and bring everybody to the room and get them involved so that all have an equal stake in the process, Second, she

provided clarification and maintained checks & balance – if anyone was drifting away, i.e. the conversation was moving away from the topic she reminded them and the room about this. Also, she stressed that it was not about giving answers but being involved in finding solutions. **Third, she asked insightful questions** about the issues raised which to understand and discuss the situation further. **She was empathetic** to my situation, I felt **reassured**...and **supported**' (AL member 12).

'Part of the role was to facilitate and ensure that the group was managed, to create time boundaries and a framework in which the group had to operate such as check in, mindfulness exercise etc. Also to create a safe environment that is to build trust, provide encouragement and support, all the things you need to give the support. Also, she made it feel light; so I was non-judgemental so for example we not supposed to answer the question ('problem') of the other member but give support to the other person to find the solution' (AL member 13).

'She actually **break the ice** and she helped with a lot of things we were talking about. She was open to what we wanted to discuss. **Questions** would be asked, she also **prompted** and help us remember what we needed to discuss and put us in the **right direction**. It was quite good – the way she prompted us with questions and gave us **space to think**' (AL member 14).

Q2. Did the facilitator have a particular style or approach? Were the sessions structured or open? Can you give an example of the AL facilitator being directive/ structured in the sessions? Can you give an example of the AL facilitator being open, i.e. less directive in the sessions?

She asked open ended questions, sometimes **directive but in an open way** if that makes sense. They were particular questions not just yes and no answers, for example what would you find helpful? How do you think you can overcome this barrier? Helping us to think about particular barriers, how we can break them down, like I said earlier helping us to reflect. Open ended questions was definitely her style, also **non - autocratic, quite friendly**. I think that was her over all approach' (AL member 1).

'I found her **approachable**, I found her **genuine**, and I found her **humble** which allowed me to be relaxed, feel comfortable and confident. She asked **open ended questions** which allowed you to explore and share what you were experiencing at that time' (AL member 2).

'Her style was to open...she was very happy and cheerful which was very important actually... She was very engaging and she made us feel at ease. She appeared to be passionate about what she was doing and loyal to the cause, that she was really serious about it, she was fully present in the room...' (AL member 3).

'The process was structured but otherwise it was open...The first session was more structure...Another session looked at our leadership style, that one was far less structured. It was more fluid' (AL member 3).

'Her approach was open, relaxed and calm because anxiety can be transferred very easily...She was supportive and she made a lot of eye contact...active listening...' (AL member 4).

'She had a coaching style, it is helping people to come to their own answers and not coming in and saying here is the answer. Asking questions, encouraging them to think what their options are, where they are now, where they want to go, that kind of encouragement...She was not an overpowering person, you felt at ease with, felt quite comfortable' (AL member 5).

Very systemic in the way of thinking in her approach and thinking process...Very much looking at the individual and how the system around them impact on them and how the individual impact on the system...very good listener, sometimes we went rambling a bit but we were given space, space to talk, there was respect, there was lot of encouragement, there was one member who found mindfulness difficult, he was always encouraged to try and asked how he found it, it was not like you don't have to do it, it is good to be challenged sometimes, come out of our comfort zone. I felt this was done in a very gentle, respectful way...The terms of the mindfulness exercise, the facilitator was more directive (AL member 6).

'She engaged the whole group, very calming presence and very supporting' (AL member 7).

It was a personal kind of approach...encouraging us to think about ourselves, giving us the permission; before it was about managing, a lot of protocol of how to manage and how to look after my staff but I never got permission to think about how I look after myself, how I manage myself, that was very much part of our discussion. She was giving me feedback on what I was saying, highlighting the main points...she was rephrasing and repeating. Also she adopted her style to the needs of the individual (AL member 8).

She was **relaxed**, **welcoming**...asked **open style and follow up questions**, **reflective** tone throughout, made it **easy** for people to speak, also the confidentiality helped (AL member 9).

She made me feel **comfortable**, her style of asking **open questions**...**digging a bit deeper**, she **gave us the confidence** and enabled to ask questions and share experience which we may not have elsewhere (AL member 10).

Very **professional**, very open, create a lot of interaction, **engage** well with each one of us. She **developed relationship** with each one of us, she was very **patient** and she allowed us to engage and discuss...she **empowers** us. she was a very **good listener**, she can always **rephrase** what you are saying, she repeated what you said accurately (AL member 11).

She has various different styles; what each individual brings in is what she facilitated, she is **very direct** in terms of engaging the individual; she **listened** very carefully. She help you to bring your own ideas **to solve your own problem**. She **asks you questions** and the answers come from you , or you ask the question and then you find the answers while you are asking the questions, it channel you to stay **focused** on what you are thinking (AL member 11).

The **calmness** of the facilitator. Also, she assured the room that it was a closed group which really helped. She was **a good listener**, showed that someone was really interested. Here was apt attention in the room. She also **asked questions**. First session was more structured, others more open but still covered what was expected (AL member 12).

‘She was very **relaxed**. We checked in and she created a relaxed spaced. Also she identified themes that was coming back for each person, **summarising** what was said. Also picking up on something others had not pick up on mentioned. So there was a bit of **leadership** here as well. It was about **getting the best out of the person** as an external person, who was not involved in the person’s work. Some sessions had less structure; there are some people who had more of a voice in the group and have a lot to say. Session 2/3 had more direction, when specific issues were raised and needed to be discussed’ (AL member 13).

‘Normally, in the beginning, she would give instruction, creating the environment and this was **structured**. Then she **offered an open space for what we wanted to talk about** and she would facilitate that. So it was bit of both’ (AL member 14).

Q3. Where there any emotional moments/situations, particularly difficult ones, at the sessions?
How were these facilitated? (Prompt: if not, how should these be facilitated?)

'I was quite emotional but not in the sense that I was teary or anything but more angry. She would keep it quite containing, she would be able to contain these emotions, feelings and help me to rationalise.... what would help? What can you do? How can this be overcome? So I would say she was quite supportive and would get me to think and reflect as well as would contain these emotions' (AL member 1).

'She seemed to be in control of the discussion otherwise we could deviate, she kept the focus' (AL member 2).

'The facilitator was able to look at it objectively, there was warmth in it...' (AL member 3).

'The facilitator calmed [her] down, asked her to take a back seat, get the person to understand...it is still your ideas...think about the best way...so needed to listen, observe and prompt...what you would do in that situation...how would you manage it...we also prompt each other as well. Not telling them what to do but kind of being supportive and this is very important as it is one thing to listen and one thing to act but prompting...' (AL member 4).

'Facilitated in a very supportive way and also to acknowledge and validate the feelings and facts, to acknowledge how difficult that situation must be' (AL member 5).

'The word that come to mind is empathy, even my peers there was definitely empathy. There was also courage, sometimes it was a bit emotional, and there was encouragement to think in a different way...our facilitator helped to reflect and if something was said that was a bit harsh she will reframe it...I felt safe, there was a safe space to be our self, be honest and there was no judgement, there was no criticism' (AL member 6).

'She emphasised wellbeing of self, you have think about your own wellbeing, she kept saying it and you take your step back...she helped us to think about how we might come across as a manager...' (AL member 7).

'One participant was very emotional, the approach was allow the emotion to be expressed and also to give advice, were to go for support. Also we in the group were able to comfort the person and give advice and maybe reflect on our situation...She was signpost and giving encouragement' (AL member 8).

'Listening, that was the main thing. Everything was handled very sympathetically...also questions such as what else can you consider? What are your options now?' (AL member 9).

'In fact, it was very honest, very open, we realised that we had a lot in common with instances that had happened with members of staff...the way it was facilitated helped to be honest. The facilitator listened but also pulled people back if they veered off...We know that what we said would be confidential, it would not go any further, no names were mentioned. The scenarios were all relevant and the feedback was very good and it always helped to know that others have the similar issues to you' (AL member 10).

'During the mindfulness exercise, there was a lot of emotions...she helped us to reflect...I reflected at a personal level and I felt a lot of emotions. It helped me to make a decision from it' (AL member 11).

'She showed empathy, warmth & support. She showed emotional maturity. There was rapt attention from her, unspoken empathy, good eye contact, stretch of hand (in support), active listening. She also gave me the space, she asked questions to draw out more information from me, the facts and specifics through probing questions' (AL member 12).

'She made the person feel safe. It was contained very well. The feeling was that it was safe to talk about it and it did not feel uncomfortable. When I discussed my 'issue' she was able to relate to it, reflect back what you said, I felt listened to and also she got you to think about it to, it was not about letting a story but reflecting and being critical' (AL member 13).

'When I was talking about it...I was emotional. After I brought this up and discussed it with the group I felt less emotional, I felt supported by the facilitator and the group. After talking about it I was reassured ...it was helpful to talk about it was a safe space for this...I realised I had done all that I could have done' (AL member 14).

Q4. Can you give an example of how the AL facilitator addressed any differences (of opinion/ ideas) or any conflict within your sessions? Did you feel supported/ listened to during such interventions? Were you engaged in this?

'So there were times when someone who say I am not so sure about this, have you tried this, I don't agree with that, we did not always agree but we respected each other. So it turned into a very supportive environment which was actually led by the facilitator. The facilitator was saying, let's think about it as a group, does anyone have an idea about this, and helped us to gel together' (AL member 1).

'It was not about conflict, it was more about a supportive environment. The main thing was listening, listening to each other and she encouraged that listening' (AL member 2).

'It was just fluid, there was harmony in it...so there is an aspect of listening and learning. So there was no real direct conflict as such...there was no solution, it was just suggestions' (AL member 3).

'If someone was over talking, she might say we have hear what you have to say, let's hear from another person...some clear direction' (AL member 4).

'I think we had a very harmonious group. People felt that they could express their thoughts and if they were not the same that was fine. I can't think of a difficult situation that had to be managed. The ground rules were set in the beginning that it is about respecting each other so that in itself was probably enough for our group' (AL member 5).

'There was a respectable voice and acknowledging... We felt listened to. It was a therapeutic space where we could be ourselves' (AL member 6).

'Reflection comes into it, reflective questions were asked to let you think. Reflect on...how did I come across, this was ok...but I could have done this differently. She asked a lot of reflective question to let you think' (AL member 7).

'On some occasions we could not follow what the person was trying to say so the facilitator would be rephrasing certain things or asking questions...there were differences in opinion but

it was facilitated in a **non-judgemental** way to express our views and we felt that our **views were valued**' (AL member 8).

'Very supportive, **calming atmosphere**, there was no conflict or difference of opinion. People were sympathetic to what others were saying. The calmness of it all made the process a lot easier...' (AL member 9).

'Even though there was a structure, we were **allowed to be ourselves**. I did **not feel awkward**, or that I could not say some thing or **talk about my experiences**. In my opinion the AL sets were probably the most **helpful**, I learnt a lot more because of the intimate setting, and for me it felt better' (AL member 10).

'She was very good that she **put all that into context**, giving people the **opportunity to speak**, not speak over them, she was very mindful that the time is distributed equally. Some people are more vocal than others and the facilitator is aware of that and so she capped others so everyone could have a chance, **she engaged everybody**' (AL member 11).

'She **moderated** the ones who had a bigger voice in the room. I think the **setup, structure helped with this**' (AL member 12).

'There was **harmony** in the group. There was time people would say something and others would think about it and add and move on, so more like **acceptance of each other's views**. She set the frame and created the harmonious, safe space for this' (AL member 13).

'The facilitator really **supported** us in whatever we were going through and she gave us **good and positive feedback**. Ad I find it very, very **helpful**. The facilitator really supported us, gave us good, positive and **constructive feedback**' (AL member 14).

Appendix 17

Action Learning Facilitator interview transcripts

1. *What is your aim as an AL facilitator?*

The aim are to encourage **dialogue**, to develop their skills -**active listening, reflection and inquiry** so each can get a **better understanding of the challenges** they are facing, **generate widen options** and then finally **sense making** and increase clarity of thoughts will enable them to **release energy** and **focus** things more clearly on their performance. (AL facilitator 1).

I would like to use the word purpose, depending on what I do there is a **clarity of purpose** that I go into as my role as a facilitator...First, it to go in with a mind-set to creating and holding an environment in which people **feel safe** and there is a **space to think and reflect**. And at the first level I see that as a **containing space** for the collective and I do think that the work that we do between check-in and mindfulness, enables a person to a) situate themselves, and b) for the collectively to belong together (AL facilitator 2).

My aim is to keep group **safe** and enable them to **share learning** and **assist with problem solving** of issues occurring at work. Initially more **structured** but more **fluid** now. Aim was to aid their **learning in a critical way**...to situate their learning in theoretical views, contextualising more widely...I was helping them to make sense, so **sense making** was an important element (AL facilitator 3).

2. *What theories, models and techniques do you draw upon?*

While preparing myself for a session, at the top of a piece of paper I would have 2 arrows which would have **high rapport and high clarity of purpose**...I try to **role model** some of the skills and behaviours as a AL facilitator which I hope they will adopt, it requires to have strong understanding and **self-control, self-regulation** during the course of the AL session so that I can facilitate their thinking and development (AL facilitator 1).

So for **organising reflection**, the work of Russ Vince, Mike Pedler - for me very informative. Vince & Martin - taking a look at AL and saying that there was more to it than Kolb's experiential learning...there was an **emotional domain** and a political context and Kolb's theoretical framework around experiential learning...I am aware in what happens in term of **team dynamics**, shared sense of purpose in AL although not a team; Burns's work on **dialogue is** also useful...(AL facilitator 2).

Models of learning and organisational development...also drew parallels with counselling ,that shifted when I learn about the problem...then related more to psychological theories...also not the problem solving, focus on the emotions, ...Organisational **sense making** – **constructing and framing the problem**. Move from **individual theories and to organisational theories**, the role of the facilitator is vital to guide deep learning (AL facilitator 3).

3. *If someone came into the room, what would they see you doing?*

They would see me and a group of people sat **comfortably**, **relaxed** but **alert**, an individual will be speaking and others will be **listening** and nodding...yes I am a facilitator so there is an element of leading but also as quickly as possible there needs to be acceptance that I am an **equal member of the group**...Encourage them to speak to the other members of the group on an equal footing to myself, it is not just me who is making sense, the others in the group are also a part of the **sense making** (AL facilitator 1).

They would see me **listening**, they see me...part of the role is like a midwife, you sit with someone and help them tell their story, you help them to let them find the words to tell their story, part of this is inquiry...So this 'along sidedness', about giving them support...empathy, compassion and ...being caring and empathic. On the flip side of that, I could be **challenging** someone – sometimes it might be quiet direct...To **see things from a different lens**, want them to stop and **think**. Occasionally make notes and feedback words people use...giving them a voice and clarity is the mind, so there is a **sense making role** (AL facilitator 2).

Actively listening, non-verbal clues, eye contact, leaning forward, prompting where necessary, clarifying, summarising, paraphrasing, different styles of questioning in a critical way to make sense of their problem (AL facilitator 3).

4. *What are the values that inform your role/practice?*

Equality – I wanted them to realise that they had the opportunity to share their perspectives. **Diversity** – acknowledging diversity in the group, this idea that people will see things differently, people have different ideas and people's experiences are valuable. Taking to get this across to the group. **Respect** – listen to people, thank them for their contribution, build on what they said, skill of a facilitator is not to kick it on the grass but to take a minute or so to follow up e.g. what triggered that...can you help us to understand...help to be reflective...(AL facilitator 1).

In terms of learning there is a person-centred approach, there is an **ethic of care**. Giving people choice and letting people know, especially around disclosure, that they bring what they want to. So with this there is **confidentiality** (AL facilitator 2).

Ethic of care being registered nurse, **anonymity, confidentiality, support and care**, keeping them **safe in the space**. Also, broader ethical stance about society and the need for change where organisational practice may not be safe...so social justice...Overriding driver was **psychological safety and wellbeing** and safety in sharing (AL facilitator 3).

5. *How did you address the participant's feelings /emotions during the sessions?*

'Demonstrate **empathy, acknowledge**/make comments and say for example 'in the interest of other members can you share what triggered that...' be aware that others may have their emotions triggered, how I balance the support for the individual who is having the emotional outburst and the others in the room who may have their emotions triggered...So there is an element of empathy but it is **neutral** and **Objective**...There is a danger for the facilitator to try to solve the

problem, this is a pitfall that the facilitator needs to avoid, here showing **emotional intelligence**' (AL facilitator 1).

I think it is the **empathy** and the along sidedness, just being there, being **supported**. It is the responsibility as a facilitated, provide a **contained space**, having a check-out is important, it is like putting the cork back on the bottle. You have to put people back together or help people to put themselves back together. So I think there is a **duty of care** (AL facilitator 2).

Important **not to be dismissive**, to be **non-judgemental** **actively listening**, **paraphrasing**, **summarising**, **enable person to feel clearer to making decisions**, the space created to be bring emotions, certainly not to stop it...I was very moved by it, had personal experience, also aware of the **need for emotional distance**...shifting gears as it was a serious issue, lots of things going through my mind but the overriding thing was that this **person needs to be heard**, **intensified my listening**, taking it very seriously, not dismissive...I created more space for them, active listening, **contextualising the issue** and help to consider the options...more focus on the person...**more direct intervention**...(AL facilitator 3)

6. *How did you deal with your feelings /emotions during the sessions?*

That is a balancing act...a good night sleep to **think clearly and make better decisions**. I anticipate these AL sessions to be physically and psychologically demanding and I have to maintain **my posture facial expression, eye contact and thinking clearly** as well. Preparation in advance, in the moment I have developed enough of a repertoire or skill set to **anticipate and recognise feeling and emotions**...share my own anecdotes, need to honour those stories, treat with respect, share them but...not highjack (AL facilitator 1).

Reflection-in action, paying **attention to my gut, body, feelings**, perhaps even naming it. I may call a break...being mindful of what is my stuff and what is their stuff, while I am quite open **to sharing**, in care there is reciprocity, sharing a snippet but not off-loading everything...avoid projection (AL facilitator 2).

Valued our **supportive structure** around these sessions, acknowledgement of **supervision and off- loading, taking notes, mental preparation before and after,** I used **reflection**s to manage my emotions which really helped (AL facilitator 3).

7. *How did you work with differences (differences in opinions, values, needs, experiences, expectations) during sessions?*

There is **protocol and ground rules** to manage differences...if it happened it will be important to **acknowledge**, resist temptation to ignore it, or force conversation to back on to acceptance path (AL facilitator 1).

One of the great things about an AL session is that you get **multi-perspectives**. I am focusing on the person, in a collectively way, I tend to work with what is **emerging**...**fairness/ equally** in treating people and **being valued** (AL facilitator 2).

Non-judgemental, help people to feel their **contribution is valued**, some people were clearly wanted more air time but it was to sensitivity manage that, leaning forward...not losing that care for them. Brain has to work over time to think what I need to do next...Setting up the room was important to me, **creating the space** was important to me, welcome them, allowing them to chat amongst themselves, manage the time better, equal air space, able to sit back, creating the caring space...(AL facilitator 3).

Appendix 18

Thematic Analysis

Step 1 - Getting familiar with the data & generating initial codes

Data analysis dates: 30.1.17 & 1.2.17

Review dates: 30.11.17, 3.12.17, 7.12.17

This involved close examination of text, line by line, to facilitate micro analysis of the data. This promoted further coding which identified any new information by de-contextualising bits of data embedded within the primary data.

1) Role of AL facilitator

- a) Provide a platform/ co-ordinate/structured discussion/exchange of views (dialogue)
- b) 'all voices are heard' / openness from all
- c) Encourage to think and reflect fully – individual and group reflection
- d) ask open and insightful questions/'prompts'/seek clarification(inquiry)/explore options (sense making)– 'how might you do things differently'
- e) guide, advice
- f) listen, showed he/she was really interested/ made eye contact
- g) rephrase/summarise
- h) give feedback
- i) show empathy/encouragement
- j) not give answers but help to find solutions
- k) raise self-awareness
- l) be non-judgemental
- m) bounded, contained , main 'checks and balances'
- n) create a culture of trust/ provide confidentiality' 'safe' environment
- o) provide space to be mindful/ be calm
- p) lead in the right direction
- q) conscious of/manage group dynamics
- r) a personal approach, 'break the ice'
- s) encourage dialogue
- t) inquiry
- u)Sense making
- v) clarity of thought/purpose
- w) release energy

2) Style, approach and values of the AL facilitator (including theories & models applied)

- a) Calm/relaxed –'created a relaxed space'/'made me feel at ease'
- b) Approachable/ friendly/cheerful/welcoming
- c) Humble
- d) Genuine/ fully present in the room
- e) Engaged at a personal level, built a relationship with the members /enable dialogue
- f) Patient

- g) Professional
- h) Supportive
- i) Built confidence to be able to ask questions and share experiences
- j) Reflective tone/ pay attention
- k) Showed respect
- l) Systemic approach/ critical thinking
- m) Coaching style – listening, giving feedback
- n) Showed leadership
- o) Able to get best out of people/ Organising reflection
- p) Structured/ directive but in an open way: when members were worried, addressed/ as questions which had not been raised in the group to focus discussion
- q) Open approach/ less structured: take a step back when members are fully engaged
- r) Self-control, self-regulation
- s) ‘tune into my inner sensations’
- t) High rapport/high clarity
- u) Equality – equal participation
- v) Diversity – acknowledging diversity in the group
- w) Respect – listen to others and build on it
- x) Ethic of Care (empathy, compassion)
- y) Confidentiality

3) Managing emotions

- a) ‘contained’ the situation and emotions(keep focus, help to calm down, validation of feelings & facts)
- b) help to rationalise reason for emotions (think & reflect), problem solving approach – probing/asking questions(what, why, how...) to understand, take decisions
- c) objective/ neutrality but with warmth & empathy –‘felt safe’
- d) acknowledgement/ allowance for emotions
- e) supportive/ sign posting of further support/ offer comfort – duty of care
- f) ‘able to be myself’
- g) encourage open disclosure
- h) ‘felt listened to’
- i) help to identify ways of building resilience
- j) showed emotional maturity
- k) ‘along sidedness’
- l) ‘take a break’
- m) Reflection-in-action –anticipate and recognise own emotion

4) Managing differences/ conflicts –it was a supportive/calming environment; overall there was harmony in the groups and acceptance of each other, strong aspect of respect, listening and learning from each other

- a) The structure/ ground rules/ protocol helped to moderate/ mindful of time distribution (e.g. to manage the bigger voice in the room and ensure the quieter voices were heard)
- b) Asked reflective questions to help members to consider their own impact (e.g. how do I come across)

- c) Questioning & rephrasing used when there was some difficulty in understanding one member (can you make this clearer...)
- d) Difference in opinion was facilitated in a non-judgemental way; views were valued
- e) Knowledge of the facilitator – sharing of experience, use of academic references
- f) Provide constructive feedback
- g) Respectful (respect in the voice)
- h) Acknowledgement (allowance to be myself)
- i) Engage everyone
- j) Clarify context
- k) Encourage multi-perspectives

Appendix 19

Thematic Analysis

Step 2: Rearranging and reviewing codes into themes

Data analysis dates: 8.2.17 & 14.2.17

Review dates: 30.11.17, 3.12.17, 7.12.17

Here, I went through a process of arranging and rearranging the codes into categories and themes began to emerge. This was a fluid process as I moved the codes around, modifying the categories, allowing the final 5 themes to emerge through an iterative process. The emerging themes are:

1. Personal Impact (Knowledge, experience & values)

- a. Knowledge of the facilitator – sharing of experience, use of academic references
- b. showed emotional maturity – reflection-in-action/ anticipate and recognise own emotions
- c. Respect – listen to others and build on it, ‘respect in the voice’
- d. Showed leadership
- e. Able to get best out of people
- f. Critical thinking– encourage multi-perspectives
- g. Approachable/ friendly/cheerful/welcoming
- h. Humble
- i. Genuine/ fully present in the room
- j. Engaged at a personal level, built a relationship with the members, allowance/able to be myself
- k. Patient
- l. Professional
- m. Supportive
- n. Showed respect
- o. conscious of/manage group dynamics, ‘work with what is in the room’
- p. a personal approach, ‘break the ice’
- q. show empathy/encouragement – ethics of care
- r. be non-judgemental, self-control, self-regulation
- s. clarity of thought/purpose
- t. release energy

2. Effective interpersonal skills (listening, questioning, feedback, summarise, rephrase, advice, guide)

- a. ask open and insightful questions/‘prompts’/seek clarification/explore options– ‘how might you do things differently’
- b. problem solving approach – probing/asking questions(what, why, how...)
- c. listen, showed he/she was really interested/ made eye contact
- d. Provide constructive feedback
- e. not give answers but help to find solutions
- f. Clarify context
- g. Questioning & rephrasing used when there was some difficulty in understanding one member (can you make this clearer...) - engage in dialogue

- h. Asked reflective questions to help members to consider their own impact (e.g. how do I come across...)
- i. Attention/active listening
- j. rephrase/summarise
- k. give feedback
- l. guide, advice/ lead in the right direction
- m. Built confidence to be able to ask questions and share experiences
- n. Reflective tone
- o. conscious of/manage group dynamics
- p. Encourage to think and reflect fully
- q. Coaching style – listening, giving feedback

3. Enable individual and group reflection and learning

- a. Self-directed Learning – individual and organisational learning/relationships
- b. Person centred approach
- c. Systemic approach (alignment, circularity/neutrality)
- d. Engage everyone in organised reflection
- e. Comrades in adversity
- f. Community of practice
- g. Raise self-awareness
- h. Experiential learning
- i. Enable sense making

4. Work with diverse needs, challenges and emotions

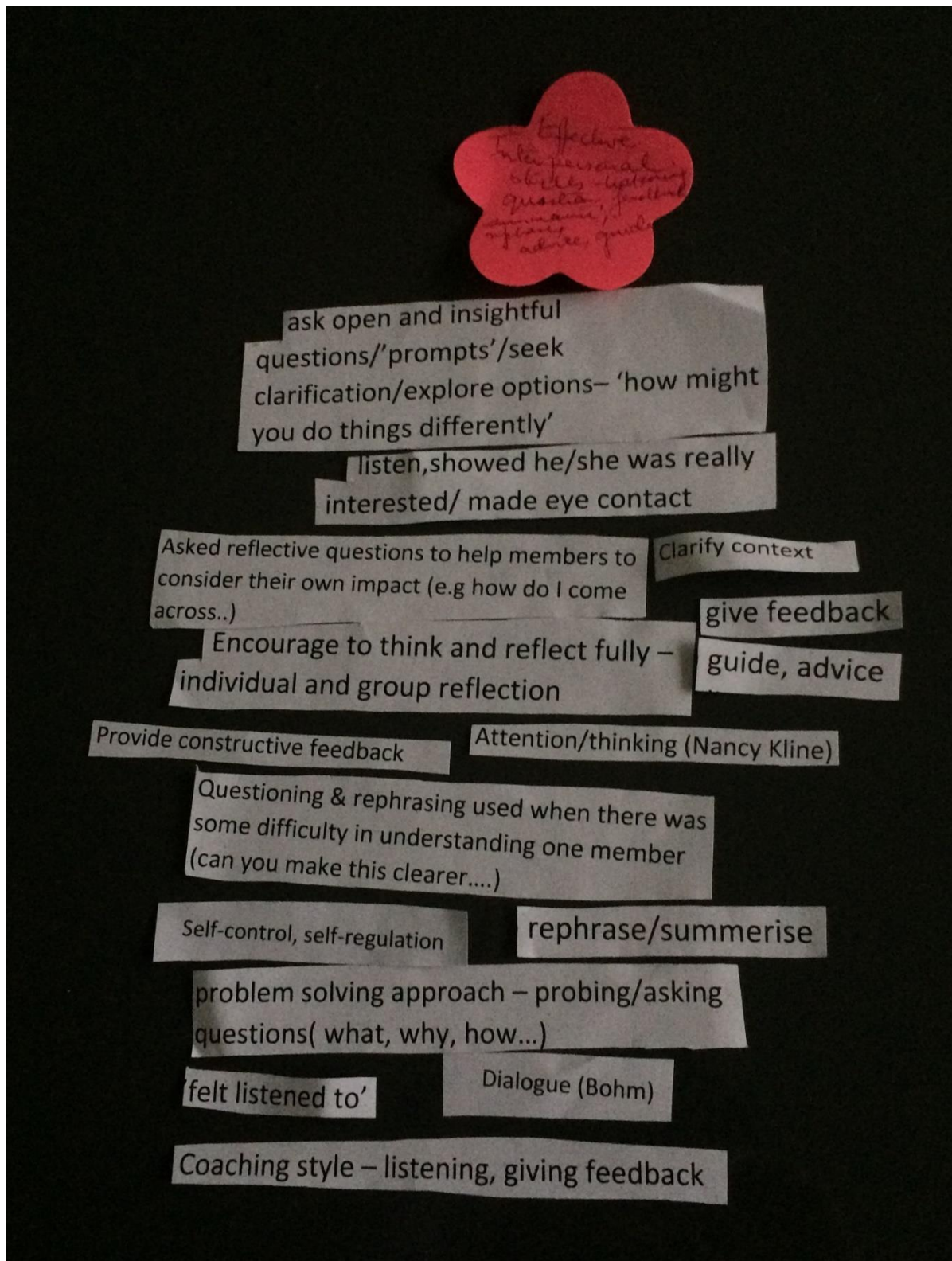
- a. Difference in opinion was facilitated in a non-judgemental way; views were valued
- b. The structure helped to moderate/ mindful of time distribution (e.g. to manage the bigger voice in the room and ensure the quieter voices were heard)
- c. encourage open disclosure
- d. help to identify ways of building resilience
- e. acknowledgement/ allowance for emotions
- f. supportive/ sign posting of further support/ offer comfort
- g. contained' the situation and emotions (keep focus, help to calm down, validation of feelings & facts)
- h. help to rationalise reason for emotions (think & reflect)
- i. showed emotional maturity – 'tune into my inner emotions'
- j. High rapport/high clarity (Clutterbuck)
- k. Diversity – acknowledging diversity in the group
- l. Take a break
- m. Confidentiality

5. Creating a supportive environment (a 'contained space', calm, safe, mindful, structured but open)

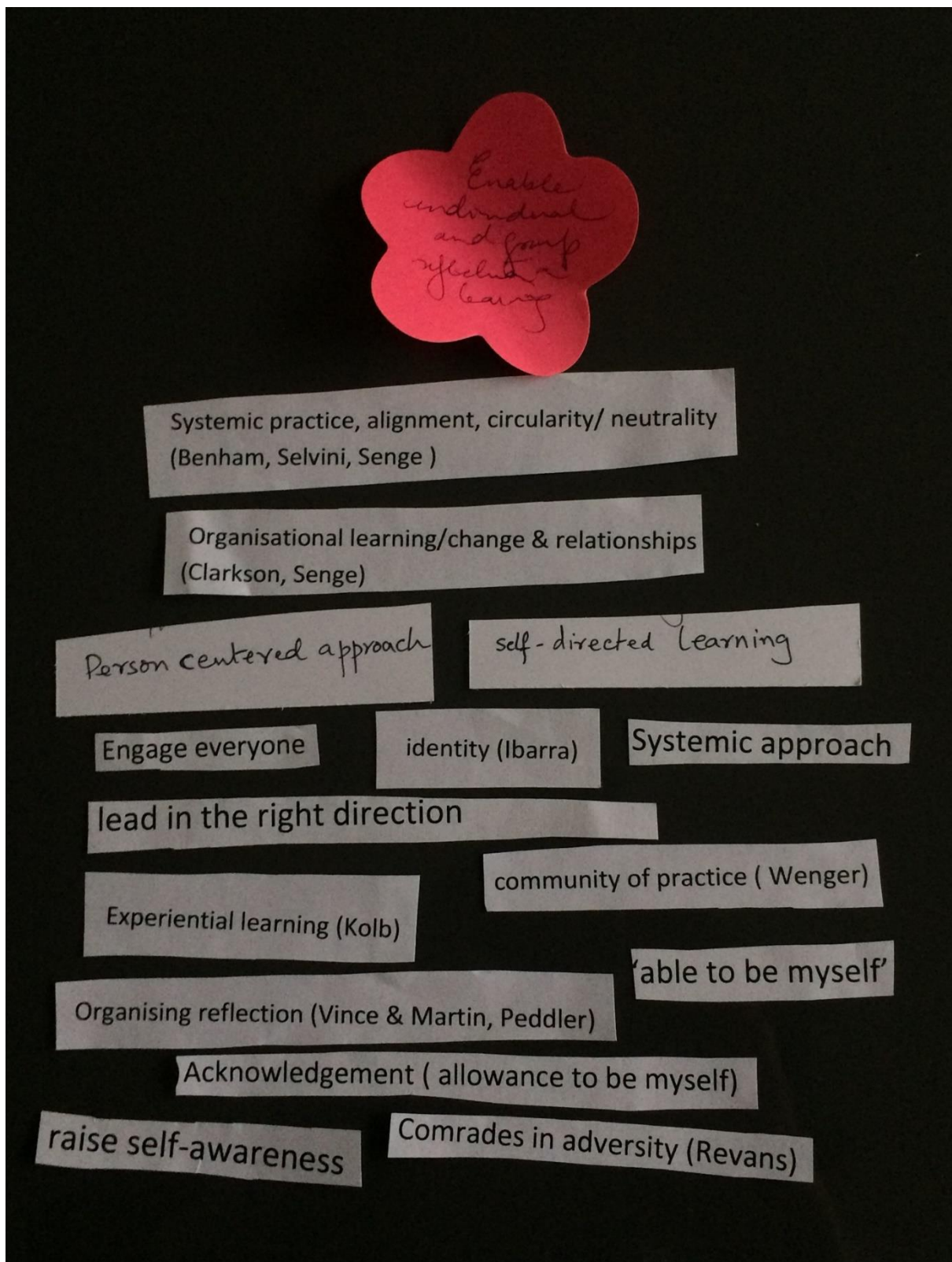
- a. It was a supportive/calming environment overall there was harmony in the group and acceptance of each other, strong aspect of respect, listening and learning from each other
- b. objective but with warmth & empathy – 'felt safe' (altruism)
- c. Equality – equal participation,

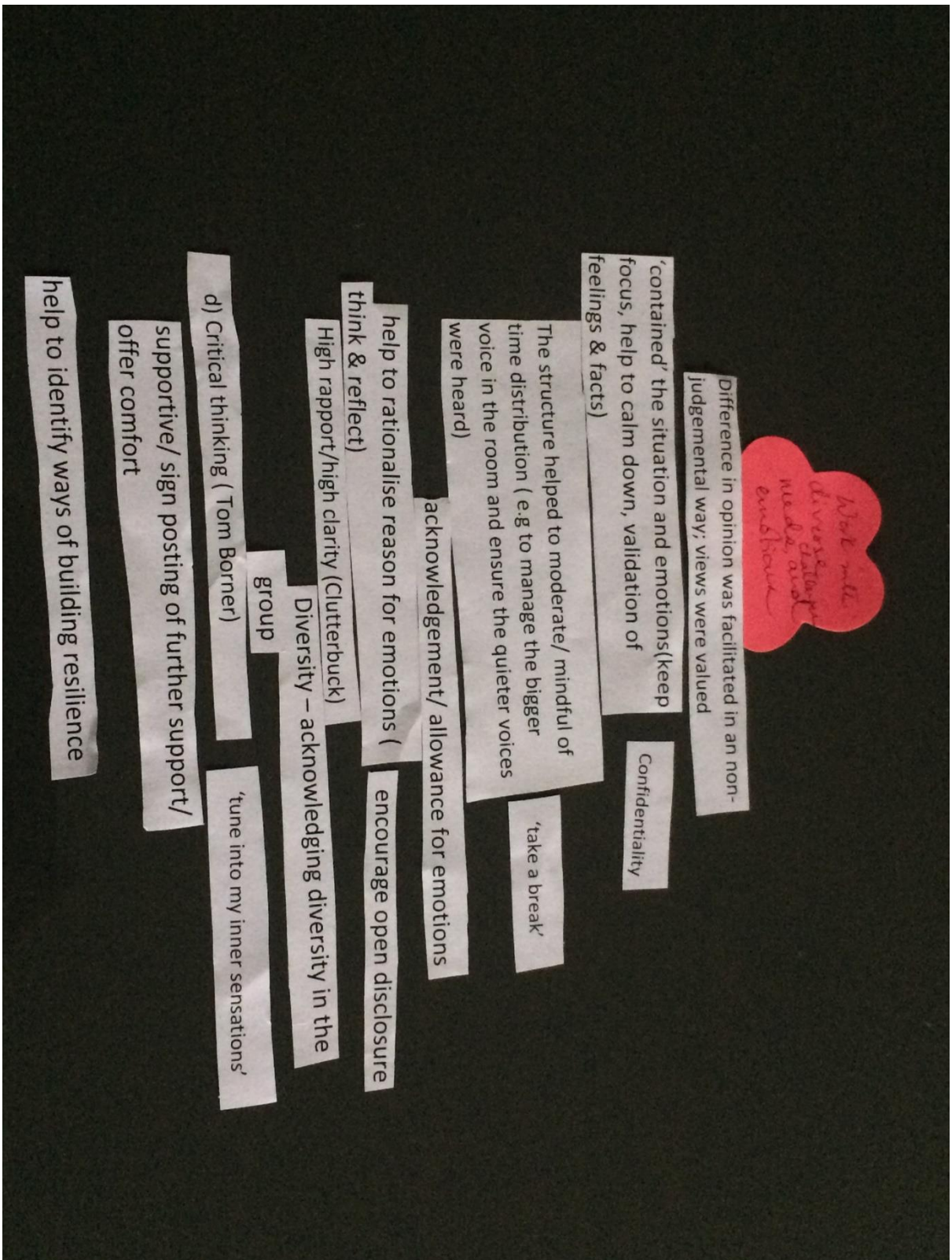
- d. Structured/ directive but in an open way: when members were worried, addressed/ as questions which had not been raised in the group to focus discussion
- e. Open/ less structured: take a step back when members are fully engaged
- f. Calm/relaxed –‘created a relaxed space’/’made me feel at ease’
- g. boundaried, contained , main ‘checks and balances’
- h. create a culture of trust/ provide confidentiality’ ‘safe’ environment
- i. provide space to be mindful/ be calm
- j. Provide a platform/ co-ordinate/structured discussion/exchange of views
- k. ‘all voices are heard’ / openness from all

Appendix 20

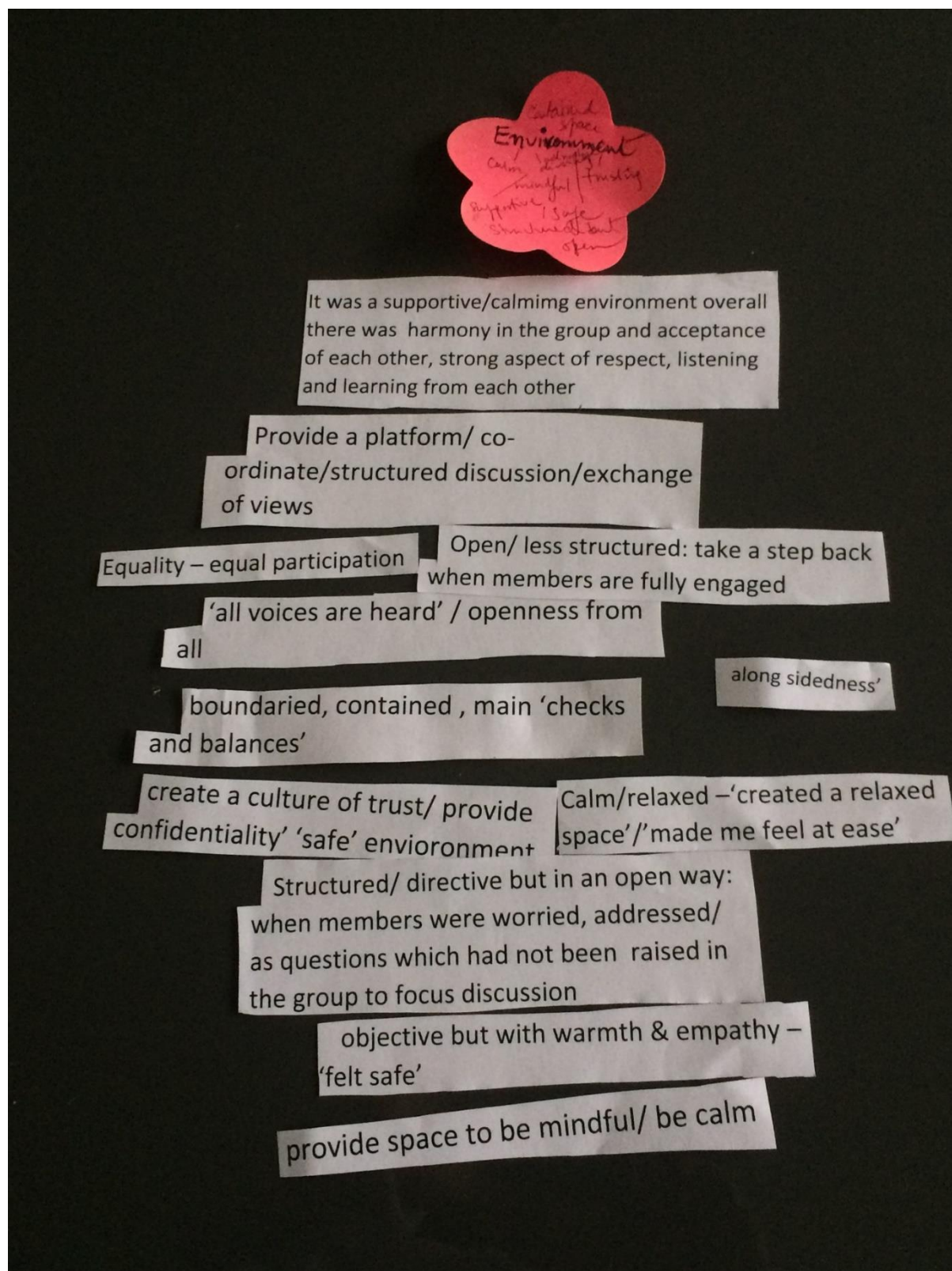


Appendix 21





Appendix 23



Appendix 24

Thematic analysis

Defining and naming themes – Step 3

Date analysis date: 20/2/17 to 16/3/17

Review dates: 30.11.17, 3.12.17, 7.12.17

To understand and analyse the evidence in the context of my research aim i.e the pedagogy of Action Learning, I have next looked at the data through the following lenses:

- commitments and values that need to underpin the practice – **The ‘art’ of AL facilitation.**
- knowledge, skills and experiential practice of the AL facilitator - **The ‘craft’ of AL facilitation.**
- processes and structure to enable AL outcomes – **The ‘apparatus’ of AL facilitation.**

1. The commitment and the values

- a. Approachable/ friendly/cheerful/welcoming
- b. Humble
- c. Genuine/ fully present in the room
- d. Engaged at a personal level, built a relationship with the members
- e. Patient
- f. Professional
- g. Supportive
- h. Showed respect/ listen to others and build on it, ‘respect in the voice’
- i. a personal approach, ‘break the ice’
- j. show empathy/encouragement – ethics of care
- k. not give answers but help to find solutions
- l. be non-judgemental, self-control, self-regulation
- m. clarity of thought/purpose
- n. release energy
- o. Difference in opinion was facilitated in a non-judgemental way; views were valued
- p. encourage open disclosure – *ability to be me, acknowledgement*
- q. help to identify ways of building resilience
- r. acknowledgement/ allowance for emotions
- u. supportive/ sign posting of further support/ offer comfort
- v. help to rationalise reason for emotions (think & reflect)
- w. Diversity – acknowledging diversity in the group
- x. Take a break
- y. Lead in the right direction
- z. Confidentiality

2. Knowledge, skills and experiential practice

- a. ask open and insightful questions/'prompts'/seek clarification/explore options– 'how might you do things differently' – sense making
- b. problem solving approach but not only solution focused – probing/asking questions(what, why, how...)
- c. listen, showed he/she was really interested/ made eye contact
- d. Provide constructive feedback
- e. Clarify context
- f. Questioning & rephrasing used when there was some difficulty in understanding one member (can you make this clearer...) - engage in dialogue
- g. Asked reflective questions to help members to consider their own impact (e.g. how do I come across...)
- h. 'felt listened to'
- i. Attention/thinking
- j. rephrase/summarise
- k. give feedback
- l. guide, advice
- m. Built confidence to be able to ask questions and share experiences
- n. Reflective tone, *engage in collective reflection*
- o. Encourage to think and reflect fully – individual and group reflection,
- p. Coaching style – listening, giving feedback
- q. Knowledge of the facilitator – sharing of experience, use of academic references
- r. showed emotional maturity – reflection-in-action/ anticipate and recognise own emotions
- s. contain the situation and emotions(keep focus, help to calm down, validation of feelings & facts)
- t. conscious of/manage group dynamics
- u. Able to get best out of people
- v. Encourage multi-perspectives
- w. Raise self-awareness

3. Process and structure

- a. It was a supportive/calming environment overall there was harmony in the group and acceptance of each other, strong aspect of respect, listening and learning from each other – *self-directed, experiential learning*
- b. objective but with warmth & empathy –'felt safe' (along sidedness)
- c. The structure helped to moderate/ mindful of time distribution (e.g. to manage the bigger voice in the room and ensure the quieter voices were heard)
- d. Equality – equal participation, *person centred approach*
- e. Structured/ directive but in an open way: when members were worried, addressed/ as questions which had not been raised in the group to focus discussion
- f. Open/ less structured: take a step back when members are fully engaged
- g. Calm/relaxed –'created a relaxed space'/'made me feel at ease'
- h. boundaried, contained , main 'checks and balances'
- i. create a culture of trust/ provide confidentiality' 'safe' environment
- j. High rapport/high clarity
- k. comrades in adversity

- l. provide space to be mindful/be calm
- m. Provide a platform/ co-ordinate/structured discussion/exchange of views - critical thinking
- n. 'all voices are heard'/openness from all
- o. Community of practice

Appendix 25

Thematic analysis

Building a theoretical framework - Step 4

Date Analysis dates: 14.3. 17 & 15.3. 17

Review dates: 30.11.17, 3.12.17, 7.12.17

The building blocks of the theoretical framework are as follows:

“WHY” facilitate the AL sessions.

“WHAT” the AL facilitators need to do

“HOW” the AL facilitators enable learning, change and actions

The “who”, “when” & “where” elements within this framework are addressed within the context of this research study.

1. The commitment and the values

- aa. Approachable/ friendly/cheerful/welcoming
- bb. Humble
- cc. Genuine/ fully present in the room
- dd. Engaged at a personal level, built a relationship with the members
- ee. Patient
- ff. Professional
- gg. Supportive
- hh. Showed respect/ listen to others and build on it, ‘respect in the voice’
- HOW { ii. a personal approach, ‘break the ice’
- jj. show empathy/encouragement – ethics of care
- kk. not give answers but help to find solutions
- ll. be non-judgemental, self-control, self-regulation
- mm. clarity of thought/purpose
- nn. release energy
- oo. Difference in opinion was facilitated in a non-judgemental way; views were valued
- pp. help to identify ways of building resilience
- qq. acknowledgement/ allowance for emotions
- WHY { rr. supportive/ sign posting of further support/ offer comfort - Advocacy
- ss. help to rationalise reason for emotions (think & reflect)
- HOW { tt. Diversity – acknowledging diversity in the group
- uu. Take a break
- vv. Lead in the right direction
- ww. Confidentiality

2. Knowledge, skills and experiential practice

- WHAT {
 - r. ask open and insightful questions/'prompts'/seek clarification/explore options– 'how might you do things differently' –
 - s. problem solving approach but not only solution focused – probing/asking questions(what, why, how...)
 - t. listen, showed he/she was really interested/ made eye contact
 - u. Questioning & rephrasing used when there was some difficulty in understanding one member (can you make this clearer....)
- WHY {
 - v. Provide constructive feedback
 - w. Clarify context
 - x. Asked reflective questions to help members to consider their own impact (e.g. how do I come across...)
- WHAT {
 - y. 'felt listened to'
 - z. Attention/thinking
 - aa. rephrase/summarise
 - bb. encourage open disclosure – *ability to be me, acknowledgement*
- WHY {
 - cc. give feedback
 - dd. guide, advice
- WHAT {
 - ee. Built confidence to be able to ask questions and share experiences
 - ff. Reflective tone, *engage in collective reflection*
- WHY {
 - gg. Encourage to think and reflect fully – individual and group reflection,
- WHAT {
 - hh. Coaching style – listening, giving feedback
 - ii. Knowledge of the facilitator – sharing of experience, use of academic references
- HOW {
 - jj. showed emotional maturity – reflection-in-action/ anticipate and recognise own emotions
 - kk. contain the situation and emotions(keep focus, help to calm down, validation of feelings & facts)
- WHAT {
 - ll. conscious of/manage group dynamics
 - mm. Able to get best out of people
 - nn. Raise self-awareness
- WHY {
 - oo. Encourage multi-perspectives.

3. Process and structure

- HOW {
 - p. It was a supportive/calming environment overall there was harmony in the group and acceptance of each other, strong aspect of respect, listening and learning from each other – *self-directed, experiential learning*
 - q. objective but with warmth & empathy – 'felt safe' (along sidedness)
 - r. The structure helped to moderate/ mindful of time distribution (e.g to manage the bigger voice in the room and ensure the quieter voices were heard)
 - s. Equality – equal participation, *person centred approach*
 - t. Structured/ directive but in an open way: when members were worried, addressed/ as questions which had not been raised in the group to focus discussion
 - u. Open/ less structured: take a step back when members are fully engaged
 - v. Calm/relaxed – 'created a relaxed space'/'made me feel at ease'
 - w. boundaried, contained , main 'checks and balances'

- x. create a culture of trust/ provide confidentiality' 'safe' environment
- WHAT {
 - y. High rapport/high clarity
 - z. comrades in adversity
- HOW {
 - aa. provide space to be mindful/ be calm
 - bb. Provide a platform/ co-ordinate/structured discussion/exchange of views - Critical thinking
- WHAT {
 - cc. 'all voices are heard' / openness from all
 - dd. Community of practice

Appendix 26

Thematic analysis

Building a theoretical framework - Step 5

Date analysis date: 16.3.17

Review dates: 30.11.17, 3.12.17, 7.12.17

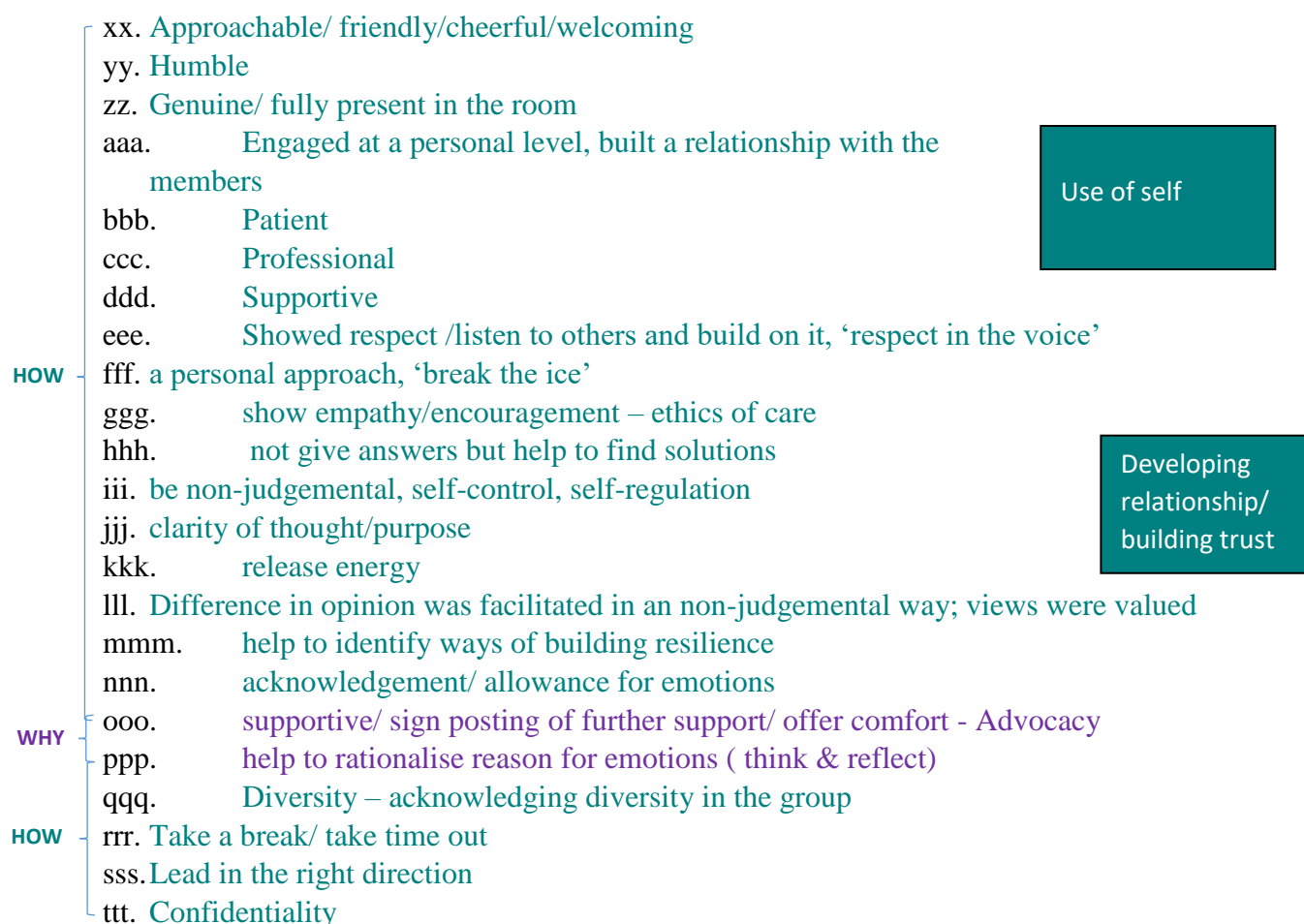
Finally, to develop a model of pedagogy of AL facilitation, I have formulated the WHY, the WHAT and the HOW of AL facilitation to develop a set of ‘constructs’ of each element of this framework.

“WHY” facilitate AL: To enable Reflexivity, Inquiry and Advocacy Enable Reflexivity, Enable Inquiry and Enable Advocacy

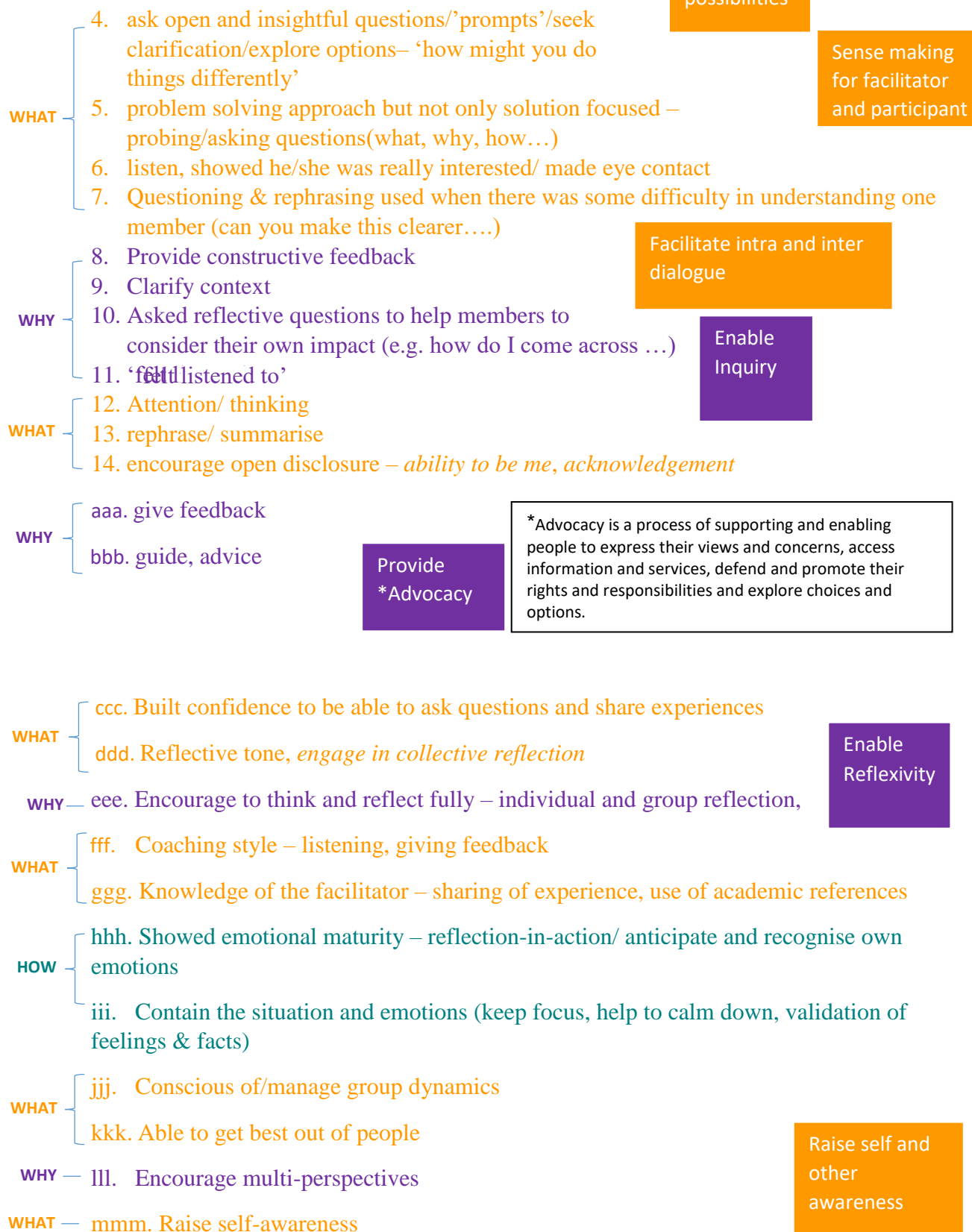
“WHAT” the facilitators need to do: Facilitate intra and inter dialogue, Sense-making for facilitator and participants, Raise self and other awareness and generate possibilities.

“HOW” they can facilitate: Facilitator’s use of self, developing relationships/ building trust and provide conditions for learning

The commitment and the values



1. Skills & Knowledge



2. Process and Structure

- ee. It was a supportive/calming environment overall there was harmony in the group and acceptance of each other, strong aspect of respect, listening and learning from each other – *self-directed, experiential learning* (Kolb)
- ff. objective but with warmth & empathy – ‘felt safe’ (along sidedness)
- gg. The structure helped to moderate/ mindful of time distribution (e.g. to manage the bigger voice in the room and ensure the quieter voices were heard)
- HOW { hh. Equality – equal participation, *person centred approach*
- ii. Structured/ directive but in an open way: when members were worried, addressed/ as questions which had not been raised in the group to focus discussion
- jj. Open/ less structured: take a step back when members are fully engaged
- kk. Calm/relaxed – ‘created a relaxed space’/ ‘made me feel at ease’
- ll. boundaried, contained , main ‘checks and balances’
- mm. create a culture of trust/ provide confidentiality’ ‘safe’ environment
- WHAT { nn. High rapport/high clarity (Clutterbuck)
- oo. comrades in adversity (Revans)
- HOW { pp. provide space to be mindful/ be calm
- qq. Provide a platform/ co-ordinate/structured discussion/exchange of views - Critical thinking (Tom Borner)
- WHAT { rr. ‘all voices are heard’ / openness from all
- ss. Community of practice (Wenger)
- tt. listen, showed he/she was really interested/ made eye contact
- uu. Provide constructive feedback
- vv. rephrase/summarise
- ww. Coaching style - ‘felt listened to’ – listening, attention,

Conditions for Learning

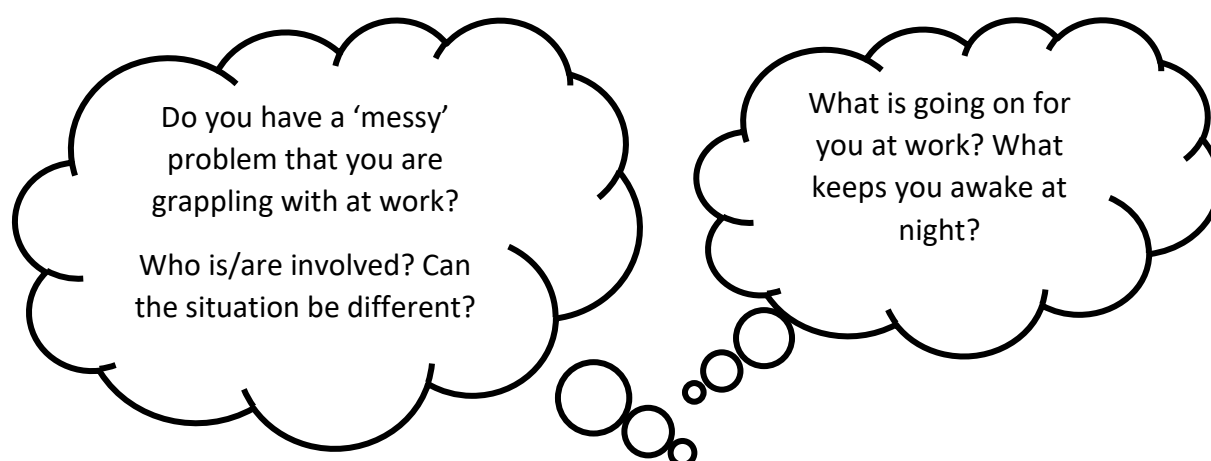
Appendix 27

Action Learning Set 1st of 4 (Tuesday 23rd February 2016)

INDIVIDUAL AIRTIME: 30 minutes for each participants

TRIGGER QUESTION:

1. Your current organisational role so that the facilitator and ALS members, as comrades in adversity/comrades in opportunity could begin to help you to learn.



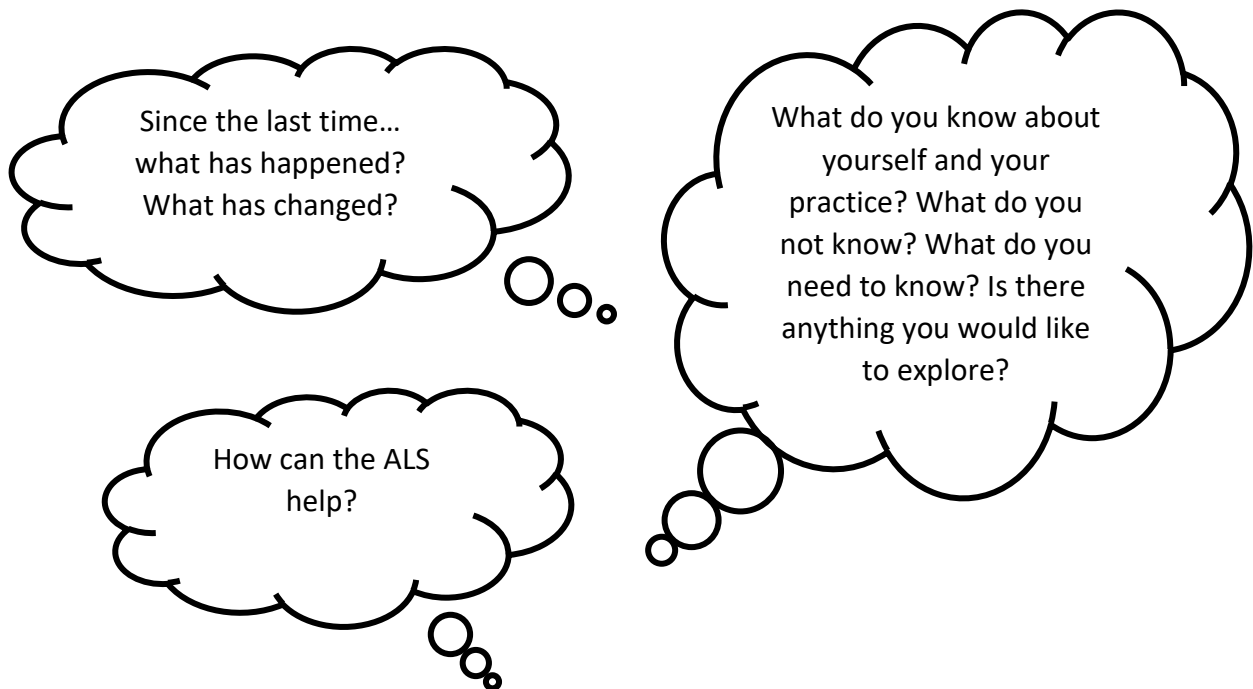
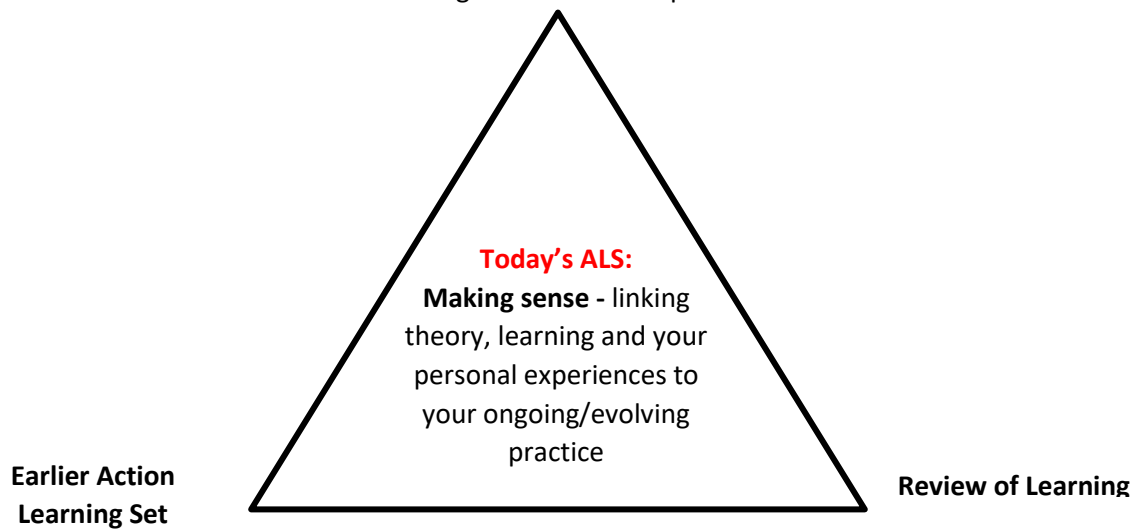
Action Learning Set 2nd of 4 (Tuesday 5th April 2016)

INDIVIDUAL AIRTIME: 30 minutes for each participants

TRIGGER QUESTION:

2. The last time we were together you told your story in order to situate yourself, to indicate some of your organisational challenges (your 'messy' problem(s) that you are grappling with) and so that the ALS, as comrades in adversity/comrades in opportunity could begin to help you to learn.
3. Today's ALS will continue that process and begin to bring together a number of elements of the journey so far.

Three Study Days: Leading & managing people; Leading & managing change; Strategic Service Development



Action Learning Set 3rd of 4 (Tuesday 7th June 2016)

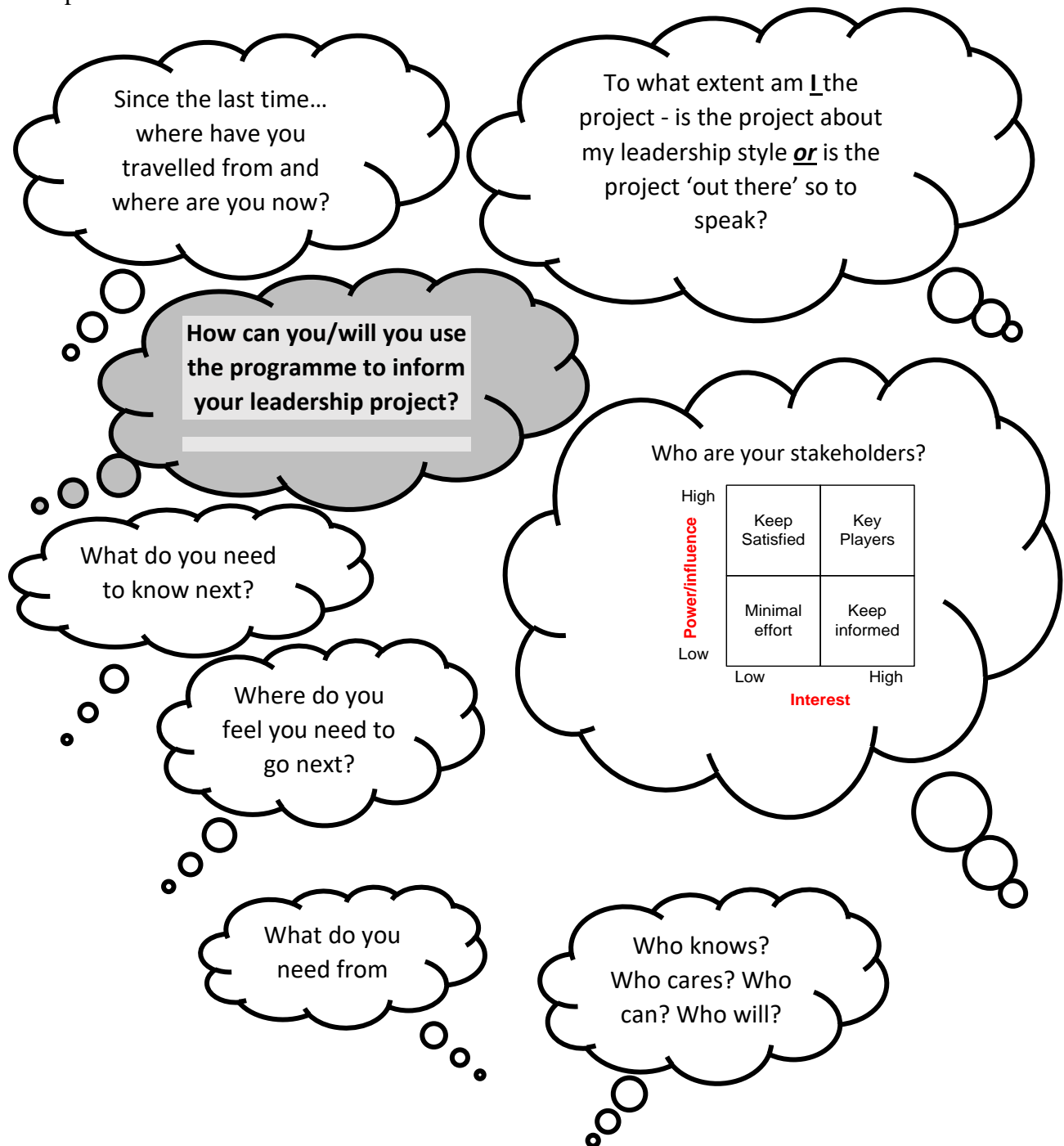
INDIVIDUAL AIRTIME: 30 minutes for each participants

TRIGGER QUESTION:

The last time we were together you focused on linking theory from the study days to your personal experiences and ongoing/evolving practice and your overall learning so far from the programme

1. Today's ALS will continue that process and begin to bring together your project and the programme

Look at these questions. Can you select two or three and share with us what you think in response.



INDIVIDUAL AIRTIME: 30 minutes for each participants

TRIGGER QUESTION:

1. The last time we were together you talked about your project and your leadership role within the project
2. Today's ALS will continue that process, particularly your leadership journey offering an opportunity to bring together the various elements of the Post Graduate leadership & Management Programme.

